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ONCE AND FOR EVER.



ONCE AND FOR EVER,

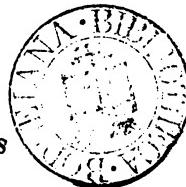
OR

*PASSAGES IN THE LIFE OF THE
CURATE OF DANBURY.*

BY THE AUTHOR OF
“NO APPEAL.” “SAVED BY A WOMAN.”

THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.



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ONCE AND FOR EVER.

CHAPTER I.

TOO LATE.

“ But O ! for the touch of a vanished hand,
And the sound of a voice that is still.”

WHAT a world of meaning lies hidden
under that one word ‘Home !’

To Norton as yet it had been full of
the deepest and happiest associations ; he
had never thought of it but with pleasure ;
never returned to it without a kindling of
the heart, and an inner joy, which came
to him at no other bidding. At school, at
college, or at work elsewhere, the very
memory of it had always spurred him on to

fresh exertion ; and the thought of what they would say or think of him in the old house at Dormouth, was with him for good both at times of failure and success.

Now it had suddenly become a word of terror and anxiety. His mother, in spite of rather frail health for some years past, had seemed so full of quiet, peaceful vigour—so intimately and essentially the mainspring of the little household—that the very idea of her being taken from it seemed too remote to be entertained. His father, indeed, might break utterly down at any time ; after being a confirmed invalid for so many years, death might interpose without a moment's warning. But the tender loving mother who had watched over her son with such unbroken affection since the hour of his birth, that she could suddenly fail was an utter impossibility ! This had unconsciously become his happy dream for years and years past ; only to be

strengthened and renewed when he returned at Midsummer or Christmas to spend his holiday at Dormouth with those whom he loved so well:

But there was no mistaking the words of the letter : “If you want to see her alive, come at once.”

He set out therefore at the very earliest possible hour the next morning; and by dint of hard travelling reached Dormouth at a late hour the same night, after a long and stormy passage in the Pendleton steamer.

It was just midnight when the wretched little tub of a boat at last anchored in Dormouth Pool; and Norton, having with extreme difficulty persuaded the captain to let him go ashore at once in one of the ship’s boats, instead of waiting until the morning, set out, carpet-bag in hand, through the streets of the silent and deserted town. He knew well every step of the road ; the narrow winding streets that led from the harbour

down by the Guildhall and prisons; the broad row of shops facing the parish church, and the stand for some half-dozen old lumbering hackney-coaches. There they all were in the cold, grey, moonlight, as he had seen them a hundred times before, but now looking unusually small and dwarfed, with not a sign of a human being in or near them. Once, indeed, he came upon a solitary policeman at the corner of a street, who eyed him sharply from top to toe; but this was the only token of life that he encountered until he reached the end of the main thoroughfare, when a strange, clinking noise overtook him, and he made out in the dim, uncertain light the figure of a donkey straying idly down the centre of the road, and stopping here and there to eat up the scraps of hay left by the hackney-coachmen on the rank during the day. The poor beast was hobbled, and the clinking noise was the rattle of the chain which bound him.

All these wearisome details forced themselves at the time on Norton's notice, as they afterwards fastened themselves on his memory, in spite of all he could do to shake them off—in spite of the sad nature of his errand, and the eager haste with which he made his way towards the home so dear to him, and the face he so longed to see. At last, he stood at the well-known door ; longing to enter, yet afraid to touch the bell, lest he should disturb the patient when sleep might be of vital importance. Not a sound was to be heard in the house ; not a light was visible ; so, with a trembling hand he rang ; waited ; rang again, and again waited. Then, after a time, a light appeared in one of the windows, disappeared, and revived ; and in another few minutes he had found out the terrible meaning of the word, *Too Late*. His mother had already been dead two days ; and the letter (undated) which had summoned him

to her bedside had, by some unaccountable mischance, been delayed four days on its journey. She had longed and hoped and prayed, so said his sisters, to see him once more, but had hoped in vain ; and the delay, at last, seemed at last to have hastened the coming of the inevitable hour.

“She never gave you up, Harry, until the very last moment ; and then calmly said that the letter must have miscarried ; that any other accident could have occurred to prevent you, she would not for a moment allow. And, when Robert came, and you not here, she was more convinced than ever.”

“She knew,” replied Norton, “that I should travel night and day to see her ; as, indeed I did. I even posted it from Tregartha to Pendleton, to save time, but all, all in vain. Dear, dear, mother ! did she often ask for me ?

"Yes, very often ; especially after Robert came. Even he wondered, especially as he said he knew you had money in your pocket."

"Did he say where the money came from ?"

"Not a word."

"He could have told you, then ; for he sent me £100 by the very same post that brought me your terrible news. But it was just like him not to say a word of his own generosity ; even if he rowed me for not coming. A hundred pounds ! and the whole of it would I gladly give to have had one more glimpse of that dear face."

"He never rowed you, Harry, or said a single hard word ; though we could see that he was puzzled at your non-appearance. Of course, he had to go back to his work on Sunday, sorry enough too that he could not possibly get away again."

In talk of this kind were spent the few

dreary hours before the dawn of a cold, bright, winter's morning. Then came a silent, half-eaten, breakfast, and then more weary talk; and more weary and useless endeavours to be as usual, and to shake off the dull, heavy sense of something wrong that weighed down the whole household. And so, the first day wore itself out at last; and they heard for the last time the faint, stealthy, step of poor old Grace Morgan creeping up the kitchen stairs, and her low whisper as she wished them Good night. She had enjoyed the infinite comfort of tears from the first; and now cried herself to sleep over master Harry's appearance, almost for joy, as she murmured

“I knowed that he would come!”

At last came the day of the funeral, every incident of which stamped itself on Norton's memory with that terrible, relentless, accuracy which now and then accompanies a time of bitter sorrow. The mind seems to be in

a state of passive deadness, and yet receives and reserves every detail of what is happening in sharp and vivid outline; like a picture on a sheet of sensitive paper, which, though unseen at first, springs up into life again on some future day at a mere touch.

Long years afterwards Norton called to mind the slow, tedious, journey to the grave; the harsh, careless, voice of an old man in a dirty surplice who hastily gabbled over the grand words of the Burial Service; the harsh rattle of the earth on the coffin; the vacant looks of the idlers who loitered in the church-yard; and the very talk of two men, the grave digger and the sexton, who shovelled in the earth into the pit, when at last all was over.

The funeral had taken place at a little country church, some two or three miles out of the town; but he declined another ride in the dreamy, hearse-like, chariot, and determined to walk home. Pausing for a

noment at the grave to gather a few morsels of wintry moss which grew near at hand, as memorial of her who slept below, he overheard the following scrap of dialogue. The two men had finished their work, and were now putting away their tools in a neighbouring shed ; one being apparently a butcher, and the other a gardener, from the neighbouring village.

“ Poor dear ! I knowed her well ; as nice a lady as I ever see ; and paid her bills regular every week, on market-day.”

“ How come you to know her, then, Sam ? ”

“ Why bless 'ee, she had all her mate at my stall every week, up to Dōrmouth market, and allays took her joints fat and lean just as they come, and never no fuss ; and allays a kind word, and ‘ Good mornin’,’ he says, ‘ Mr. Hedges,’ and went away she id with that degree of smile on her face as made things go easy all day ; and money as regular as regular.”

“ Ah ! that’s the best o’ your trade, Sam ; no bad debts, no rainy days to drop in and just spoil a job for you, and people a grumbling and a askin’ if you never means to have finished up the place, and tidied the beds, and cut the grass, and rolled the gravel ; but you just cuts up your carcase, and if they don’t like it, they can leave it ; they can’t live upon hair and sunshine ; but must have a bit o’ mate, mustn’t ‘em ? ”

“ Steady, Jem, steady. It’s all very well when wages is pretty good and it’s tidy, coldish, wholesome weather for Christmas joints, like this here December ; but, bless ‘ee, when it turns mucky like, and pretty hottish in summer, I’ve knowed a lovely carcase go right off in a night. And where are ye then ? Why, the wind’s a’ bin hufflin about now all day, and if it do get to sou’-west, thay flies’ll come out in swarms again all over the market, and pison a leg before you knows where you are. You don’t know

what thay flies be. But, how d'ee get on with them young trees up to Squire's plantation?"

"Get on, Sam? They've all took uncommon; all but one darned young holly, and he never *was* and never will be comfortable in hisself. You mark me! He won't come to no good; that he won't, a dead loss, he'll be. Poor dear! poor dear! as you says, Sam; but it's what we must all come to; and that young chap's her son, is he? Rayther a scrubby turn out, wasn't it? No hatbands, and not a glove neither for parson hisself."

And then the two cronies jogged on to the village, and Norton heard no more. He made his way slowly homewards through some quiet, green, country lanes along which he had so often walked in bygone days, as if still listening to that loving voice whose tender accents he would never hear again; and longing for the presence of her

now gone from him for ever. The talk of the two old men, though kindly enough in meaning, had somehow grated upon his ear, and the gossip about legs of mutton and thay flies was altogether distasteful. By degrees, however, he forgot it all for a time, and wandered on through lane after lane, lost in pleasanter thoughts, until he suddenly found that he had missed his way, and was at the edge of a little furzy common altogether strange to him. The short winter twilight was rapidly spreading over hill and dale, and he looked in vain across the dim landscape for some familiar landmark as a guide back to the lost road. But, at last, he descried an old man at work near a haystack in an adjoining field, and having climbed a hedge to get within hail, civilly inquired the way to Dormouth.

Twice was the question repeated before any reply was given ; and then it came in a gruff, surly, voice and tone that augured little promise or help.

"Darmouth, you'm goin' to, is it?"

"Yes; I have got out of the right path somehow."

"So it sims. You be goin' right away from it now. How cum 'ee to be wandering about down here, dazed like, 'tain't no road at all down here. Be 'ee stranger a dangin' along these parts in the dark?"

"Well, I am a stranger, and I am not. But all I want is the right road."

"You be a stranger, and you b'ain't; what d'ee mane by that now?"

"I mean just what I say. I have lost the right road, and want to find it again, if you can spare five minutes to help me."

"Do 'ee see th' old quarry-pit up to top o' hillside there?" replied Rusticus pointing, as he spoke, with his finger over a clump of furze in the hedge.

"I can't say I do," answered Norton, gazing into the darkness across the stretch of common.

"Can 'ee see, then, the old barn nigh the further end of Squire's plantation?"

"No. I cannot."

"Not see th' old barn? Well, then, you *be* a fool."

"Worse luck for me," said Norton, clearly perceiving that his only chance of getting any help from the surly old grumbler was to keep his own temper; "but, supposing I am a fool, as you say, I am quite ready to pay for my folly."

"Then, why didn't 'ee say so at fust? Just you cum along with me, man, and I'll putt 'ee straight in a jiffey."

In five minutes from that time they were at the corner of the squire's plantation, and below him in the valley not a mile off, Norton could make out the lights of Dormouth faintly visible through the evening mist.

"There now," said the surly voice of the guide, as he pocketed a shilling, "you kip

straight on, and take the fust turnin' to the left, then straight on agen, and in ten minutes you'll be right home to Dartmouth."

With this small adventure the weary day at last came to an end, and Norton was glad enough to find himself once more in the old house at home, and do what he could to cheer the mourners there during the few hours that yet remained to him. The light of the house, for a time at least, was gone ; and all that remained for him now was to take as cheerful a view of matters as might be, for their sake who yet remained in it.

So he talked brightly to his father and sisters of his future curacy ; told them the stories of Isaiah Harris, old Rookstone, and the cutting of the Bar ; his midnight ramble with Jack Borlase ; and, above all, his hope of finding Mary Hastings some day at Dorkminster.

The next evening he was at Pendleton, on

his way back to Tregartha which, however, he was not destined to reach without one more touch of adventure of a wholly unexpected kind.

It was too late that night to get through the final stage of his journey ; Norton therefore resolved to put up at his old quarters at the 'Royal Oak.'

CHAPTER II.

AN OLD GRUDGE.

HAVING seen his room, and ordered a dog-cart to take him on to Tregartha the next morning, he went down to the coffee-room to get some supper. Here dinner was now fully over, and the room nearly empty ; but one party of three or four young men were still prolonging a rather noisy entertainment in one corner, and from these Norton took up as remote a position as he could. His supper was soon brought and discussed, and one by one the other guests departed, though the jovial quartet grew even yet

more and more noisy, especially after the arrival of a fresh batch of champagne. The waiter, apparently tired out with their continual requests for some trivial service or other, had left the room, and though more than once summoned, took little notice of the bell.

Norton himself, thoroughly sick of their noisy mirth, was pacing up and down his side of the room, and just on the point of quitting it for the quieter domain of his own bedroom, when one of the party swaggered up insolently towards him, and demanded, in a loud voice,

“ Why the devil he didn’t answer when he was called ? ”

Whereupon one or two of his companions at the table rattled their glasses, and cried out, in approval and encouragement,

“ Bravo, Dick ! bravo ! ”

Norton, seeing that the fellow was even more drunk than his companions, at first

determined to take no notice of his insulting words, and, taking up a bedroom candle from the sideboard, was about to leave the room, when Dick, planting himself exactly at the open door, cried out, in still louder tones,

“No, no, my buck ! you’re not going off in that way. You may be the ‘*head*’ waiter for all I know, but I’ll be hanged if you don’t obey orders. No, no ; it’s a waiter’s business to wait. Another bottle of champagne—do you hear ? And look sharp about it !”

At this moment the real waiter, attracted by the noise, hurried suddenly into the room, and, seeing what was going on, stepped in between the two combatants just in time to prevent open hostilities.

“The gentleman’s rather fresh, sir—champagne, sir ; he don’t quite know what he’s a-doin’. If I was you, sir—”

“But that’s just it,” interrupted Norton,

now thoroughly roused ; “ you are *not* me, so have the goodness to get out of the way. As for this drunken fool, I am not going to touch him *now* ; so don’t be alarmed. But there is my card ; take it down to the tall man who is standing up at the corner of the table, and looks sober enough to understand you, and say to him that if I do not have a written apology from the person whom they call Dick before eight to-morrow morning, I will give his friend the best thrashing he ever got in his life. You know my number ; bring the answer to me there.”

With these words, he quietly quitted the coffee-room, leaving the terrified waiter to deal with his troublesome guests as best he might.

The next morning, as Norton was dressing, the waiter tapped at the door, and put into his hand the following note :—

“ *Coffee-Room,*

“ *Royal Oak.*

“ Sir,

“ I duly received your message last night, brought to me by the waiter, and regret that you did not speak to me in person. I was sober, but my friend who insulted you had been drinking more champagne than was good for him. He begs me to apologise to you for speaking as he did, and acknowledges that he was wholly in the wrong. Hoping that this explanation will be satisfactory,

“ I remain,

“ Yours faithfully,

“ JOHN HUNTER.”

To this Norton at once sent the following answer:—

“ Sir,

“ Your apology for your friend’s extraordinary behaviour is as satisfactory as any

such explanation can be, and I readily accept it. But as the insult was offered to me in the presence of the waiter, he seemed to be the proper channel for the message which I was compelled to send you. In justice to myself, I shall read to him your note.

“ Faithfully yours,
“ H. NORTON.”

Having read and despatched this reply, Norton went down to the coffee-room, and for the moment thought no more of the matter. Several parties, however, were at breakfast when he entered it ; and from the looks of evident curiosity which were now and then directed at him from one quarter and another, he saw clearly that the story had got wind, and was the subject of conversation at more than one table. This ordeal, however, was not to be escaped ; and so he wisely devoted him-

self to his broiled hake and coffee as unconcernedly as if he were the only occupant of the room.

In the waiter's eyes he seemed to have risen many degrees since the previous evening ; and that eminent functionary watched to supply his various wants with the most devoted attention, and would indeed have gladly enticed him into a conversation on the event of the previous evening.

"The four gents," he remarked *sotto voce*, "is having their breakfast in their own room, sir."

But against every such allurement Norton resolutely turned a deaf ear, and, having paid his bill, made his way out into the yard. It was Packet-day ; and many passengers were coming and going by one vehicle or another, so that he had some difficulty in finding the dog-cart which he had ordered to be in readiness.

But he found it at last, and had then to wait while the harnessing of the horse was being completed.

At this moment a chaise was driven up to the spot where he stood ; and to his surprise and annoyance the quartet of the previous evening presently emerged from the house, apparently in as noisy a condition as ever, and followed by Boots and an under-waiter carrying luggage. He turned his back upon them, and was in the act of stepping into the gig, when he received a sudden and heavy cut over the shoulders, and, jumping quickly down, turned and found himself face to face with his opponent of the preceding evening, who stood with his arms a-kimbo and an impudent grin on his face, to the great wonder of the whole yard. To snatch the stick from him was to Norton the work of a moment ; and then, before his mind was fully made up as to his next step, to his amazement he saw that '*Dick*' was

no other than his old enemy Needer, who had scarcely even yet recovered from his recent carousal, and apparently had breakfasted copiously on brandy-and-soda.

“ You drunken scoundrel !” said Norton ; “ have you forgotten the licking I gave you five years ago at Dormouth that you come here in search of another ?”

The only reply that Needer made was to snatch up from the ground a large stone, which he was on the point of hurling at Norton’s head, when his adversary gave him a smart cut with the stick across the back of the hand. This forced him to drop the missile and retire towards his friends, howling with rage and pain. But Norton had not yet finished his work. Having broken the stick into small pieces, and armed himself with a short whip from the dog-cart, he walked quietly up to the group, three of whom not relishing the look of his pale,

determined, face, at once made way for him, and left their companion standing alone to meet his fate.

" You have twice publicly insulted me," said Norton, " and unless you now publicly beg my pardon here before this goodly company, I shall give you a good horse-whipping, as that seems to be the only way of bringing you to your senses.. Any other appeal to your feelings would be wholly useless."

At these words the bully turned even paler than his opponent, and would have seized another stone, but Norton commenced operations at once, and in less than a minute had inflicted on him a sound thrashing, in spite of many frantic efforts which he made to escape from the stinging lash that curled round his legs and across his shoulders in a series of sharp and swift cuts.

" Now!" said the operator, as he re-

said the weapon to its place ; "when you drink champagne again, you will perhaps try to keep a civil tongue in your head, or at least reserve it for the benefit of your special friends."

With these words, Norton jumped into the dog-cart, and quietly drove away.

His ride back to Tregartha, however, was weary one, through heavy and cold rain which set in as he cleared the town, and beat sharply against him almost to his journey's end. Nor could he contemplate his morning's work with anything like entire satisfaction. It was true that he had in nowise sought or even provoked the quarrel with his old antagonist. But he now felt that he had acted hastily, and under the influence of passion, and shown himself to be thoroughly annoyed by a vulgar ruffian whom he had, perhaps, have better treated with silent contempt. The deed, however, was now done, and could

not be undone ; so that there was little use or comfort in giving way to regret. But he reached his old quarters in good time, and received a hearty welcome from his kindly friend the doctor.

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CHAPTER III.

SERVE HIM RIGHT.

A FEW days after this, Norton, chancing to saunter into the reading-room on the bowling-green, took up the ‘Pendleton Flying Post,’ and there to his infinite surprise and vexation read the following paragragh.

The Biter Bit.

“ Yesterday morning the quiet hostelry of the ‘Royal Oak,’ Pendleton, was the scene of a sudden and singular *fracas* between a peppery little Welshman (whose name did not transpire, but is believed to be ‘Jones’ of

Bangor) and a medical student named Needcomb, now making a walking-tour through Cornwall with a couple of friends. Needcomb, it seems, had insulted Jones on the previous evening in the coffee-room, while under the potent influence of mine host's Sillery, been forced to apologize, and then taken refuge in the arms of Morpheus. The next morning having slept off his potations, and armed himself with fresh animosity, he and his friends entered the yard as Jones was in the act of climbing into a dog-cart to continue his journey to Tregartha. Roused into sudden fury at the sight of his old enemy, Needcomb rushed upon Jones in this defenceless position, and gave him a smart blow with a bludgeon of that peculiar kind which medical tyros affect,—on a peculiarly sensitive part of his person. Upon this, Jones quickly descending from his triumphal car, instantly rushed upon the foe, disarmed him, and with a single blow across

the back of his hand, which forced Need-comb to drop a large stone, sent him back wounded and bleeding to his friends. A second apology having been demanded, and refused, a terrific combat ensued, in which the bully got his deserts, and Jones of Bangor was left to go on his way rejoicing, to the great edification of the assembled stablemen, ostlers, and waiters. The exact origin of the ‘difficulty’ is unknown, but rumour points to jealousy as the ‘causa tetricima belli.’”

This horrible mixture of truth and falsehood was as galling to the one unfortunate reader as it seemed to be amusing to some half-dozen idlers who sat at the other tables, looking at Jones with watchful eyes over the top of their respective newspapers. He had been seen on the very morning named coming into Tregartha in a Pendleton dog-cart ; the driver of which had reported to Boots at the Crown a lively version of the jolly

row that morning over to Pendleton ; and in two hours it was all over the town.

Norton's first impulse was to leave the room, and so get rid of his silent tormentors, who had all read the fatal paragraph before he came in. But this—on second thoughts —seemed unwise if not cowardly, and he resolved to brazen it out. In his desperation, he laid aside the ‘Pendleton Flying Post,’ and took up the ‘Polruin Messenger,’ a trumpery little Radical print which circulated widely through the neighbouring villages. But this was only falling out of the frying-pan into the fire. Under the head of “Tregartha Home News,” he now had the bliss of reading as follows :

“Served him Right.”

“ The dull sleepy old town of Pendleton was a day or two ago roused to a sudden pitch of excitement by a sanguinary and savage encounter between two young gentle-

men (?) not fifty miles from the ‘Royal Oak.’ How the quarrel began is a matter of curious speculation, but as yet of profound mystery. Some say that a certain Miss Jones of Bangor is at the bottom of the mischief, she having been induced to rush away from the Principality in a post-chase with a certain gallant Lothario named Nicholls, to be married in hot haste at Tregartha. Be that as it may, a rival or a relative of the fair damsel overtook the enamoured couple at Pendleton, just as they were changing horses. There was a good deal of fierce talk about ‘pistols and coffee for two,’ but it all ended in an honest but effectual bout of fisty-cuffs, a gig-whip, and a rattan. The fair lady went back to her native land, while the discomfited Nicholls, though victor in the fray, took refuge not 100 miles from Tregartha.”

This later paragraph was even more exasperatingly ludicrous than the first, and Norton was horribly puzzled whether to

treat it with silent contempt, with laughter, or by writing an indignant letter to the editor demanding an instant retraction of the slander, and an apology for its publication. Meanwhile the idlers in the reading-room sat and chuckled with whispered satisfaction over his evident astonishment and confusion. He bore it as long as he could, and then strolled miserably back to the Grammar school, where his usual work awaited him; knowing well that the 'Pendleton Flying Post' and the 'Messenger' were both by this time on the doctor's table, and that an interview with him was inevitable.

That evening, an hour after school, the summons came.

"Master's compliments, sir," said John, "and he would be glad to see you in the study to once, sir."

When he entered the study, the two papers were on the table, and the doctor

whistling softly to himself, motioned him to be seated.

“ My dear young friend,” he began, “ this is a most unfortunate affair ; so entirely unexpected and so unfortunate that I scarcely know how to approach it. False, of course, but so ingeniously, perversely, adapted to the lovers of scandal and gossip as to be as mischievous as if it were true—”

“ Unfortunately,” interrupted Norton, “ both these abominable paragraphs are true, though both substantially false.”

“ My dear Mr. Henry Norton,” said the old man, “ you amaze me ! The fire and pluck of my old friend at Dormouth I fully expected to find in his son, but the idea of such an infinite spirit of pugnacity being developed in him never remotely entered my mind. Which portion of the legend is a myth ? ”

“ Of course, sir, the Miss Jones of Bangor part of the business is a pure lie ; as well as

the post-chaise and the marriage. But years ago, when we were both boys together, I gave a fellow called Needer a good licking. To my infinite disgust he turned up again the other night, with three other drunken allies in the coffee-room at Pendleton, and publicly insulted me. For this he sent me a written apology ; but the next morning, before the whole tribe of ostlers, boots, and waiters, he again attacked me with a bludgeon which I broke to pieces, and I was then obliged to give him another thrashing as publicly as he had insulted me. He was a thorough bully, and so I thought it best to administer a lesson he would not forget."

"With a gig-whip?" says the doctor.

"Yes, the 'Flying Post' is correct enough in that point; with a gig-whip, until the lash was fairly worn out. Unfortunately it was old and rotten."

"Very rotten?"

"It lasted a minute."

"Ah!" said the doctor, with a quiet twinkle in his eye, "a good deal of execution can be done even in sixty seconds by an artist who understands his work, and has a well-developed biceps and triceps in his right arm." (Very slowly), "Did the patient now appear to feel and to appreciate the labours of his teacher thoroughly?"

"He seemed," answered Norton, "intensely grateful when the lash came off."

"His gratitude must have been delicious to see," replied the doctor. "My dear Harry Norton, it has done me good to hear even this brief outline of your achievement; but now sit down and tell me the whole story, from beginning to end. I like to hear of a bully's being well licked. It reminds me of the old 'playing fields' of long ago,

'Sat meminisse tuos, dulcis Etona, dies.'

"But I must know it all thoroughly, that I may be able to give a true account of the affair to the Bishop before some Tregartha busy-body or other sends to him either of these false ones. If now you had been going to stay with us, Norton, it might have been an awkward business for you to laugh down in this stronghold of cackling old women, male and female; but as you are so soon to take Orders and leave us, I must set you right with his Lordship at once."

Then Norton told his kindly old patron the whole story; glad indeed to find (where he had expected just the reverse) a helping hand promptly held out to him, above all in dealing with so delicate a matter as the ear of the Episcopal Palace. He had fully made up his mind to undergo a quiet, solemn wigging at the doctor's hands; and, instead, he found himself treated as a conqueror, and the way paved for him to open

a treaty of peace with no less mighty a potentate than the Right Reverend Father in God at Dorminster.

The hardest thing the old doctor said to him, when his story was finished, was, "My dear Harry Norton, that reptile at Pendleton richly deserved all he got the other morning, and I don't see how you could well have avoided acting as you did. But, 'O nimium bellicose puer,' don't cultivate the spirit of pugnacity too highly; let the potentiality be a dormant one. Bishops and examining chaplains may not be inclined to view matters in the same bellicose aspect. But I will write to Robert of Dorminster by to-night's post, and say what I can for you as a man of peace when beyond the reach of a medical student; now, the sooner your 'impedimenta' are packed up, and under weigh in the Pendleton packet for Dorminster, the better. All the prating noodles in

Tregartha will graze upon you for the next three weeks, *arrectis auribus*, if you stay here. Don't start to-morrow, or they will say I sent you away, but go quietly after a few days, when their first fit of gaping curiosity is passing over."

Thus, it came about that Norton's exit from Tregartha Church Town was rather more sudden and undignified than he had anticipated. He took leave of none of his old acquaintances ; which was perhaps rather an ill-advised and hasty step on his part, as they all imputed it to utter shame and confusion of face, after his exploits at Pendleton. Rookstone, indeed, was the only one to whom he spoke a word with reference to what had occurred.

" My young friend," said the old lawyer as they chanced to meet one day in the street, " there is a rumour that you are about to leave us, but she is such a lying jade that I don't care to believe her ? "

"You may safely do so in this case, Mr. Rookstone ; it was settled six months ago that I should take a curacy at Christmas, and now that the ' Flying Post ' has made such a hero of me, the sooner the better."

"But you don't mean to say that rascally story is true ?"

"True, my dear sir ? They have not told you half of it. If you only knew the whole affair, you would be even more astonished and delighted than you are."

"But, my dear friend," replied Rookstone, "I have denied it through thick and thin. I have said over and over again that it was morally impossible ; an absolute fiction ; that you never could have figured as ' Jones from Bangor ; ' and unless I hear the real, genuine, narrative from your own lips, and you prove you were an actor in this scandalous brawl, I shall continue to assert that no gentleman could ever have

played such a part as the ‘Post’ describes !”

“Give up denying and asserting, then, from this day forward,” replied Norton, now determined to fool the old mischief-maker ‘to the top of his bent ;’ “swear that it’s a thousand times worse than you ever suspected, that the ‘Post’ was too lenient, and the ‘Messenger’ not half so infamous as the case deserved ; and as for the verdict of ‘served him right,’ if they only knew all, it would have been ten times as severe.”

“But, which is true,” cried his tormentor, “the ‘Post’ or the ‘Messenger?’”

“Both,” cried Norton ; “both.”

“But they contradict each other ?”

“All the truer, all the more credible, on that very account. You, a lawyer, and need to be told that the truest witnesses always contradict each other ? Stick to your brief, my dear sir, let the other noodles

and gossips say what they may. Nothing is too incredible for them ; and in a month or two, you may not only get them to swallow the whole budget, but perhaps begin to believe it yourself. Meanwhile, good-bye, Mr. Rookstone ; it's quite pleasant to leave poor Jones' character in such wise and safe hands."

And so they parted ; the wily old lawyer being wholly mystified by his young friend's "brazen loquacity" as he afterwards termed it ; and intensely annoyed at having been so plainly and easily foiled.

"Served him right," therefore, was the verdict which Tregartha pronounced upon the graceless offender in the reading-room, and at the bar parlour, and at a score of even angrier tribunals where tea and scandal reigned supreme. But, happily for Norton, other enormities soon came upon the *tapis*, and before he had been six months at Dorminster, both he and the Pendleton

tragedy were well-nigh forgotten, in spite of many a sneer from old Rookstone, and many a fierce asseveration, that he only knew the true and genuine story of “Jones of Bangor.”

“He was a very artful and designing young man,” he would say, “as I always told you. I saw through him from the very first; and some day or other, perhaps, you will listen to my view of that scandalous business at Pendleton. It was as pretty a case of assault and battery, defamation and abduction, as ever happened in the county; and ought to have lasted for years if it had been properly managed. It’s all very well for Doctor Arlington to call it a pack of idle rubbish; but if you knew the story as I know it, you would soon alter your opinion. It was worth hundreds of pounds in good hands; hundreds of pounds! But what with peace societies, and Birmingham Quakers going out to palaver

the Czar of Russia, the profession is going to the very deuce."

"Going to the deuce, is it?" said Dick Trevanion in reply. "Law and lawyers all bound for the naughty place, eh? Well, Mr. Rookstone, you know best, of course. But they will meet with their own master there, at all events."

CHAPTER IV.

WORK IN BABYLON.

IN less than six months from the date of our last chapter, Norton was fairly at work, as Curate of St. Jerome's, in the famous old city of Dorminster, which at that time contained upwards of thirty churches, besides the grand old Minster, under the shadow of whose mighty towers the tiny spire of St. Jerome looked rather as if it had escaped from a box of toys than as belonging to a real parish church. The rector was old, and away from his work during the greater part of the year, so that

the young deacon very speedily had far more than enough to do in looking after the three or four thousand souls supposed to be under his pastoral care.

After a flying visit to Dormouth, he had gone down to the Minster City, made his peace with the Bishop—in spite of one slight mishap—passed safely through the hands of examining chaplains, and resolutely set to work,—in what spirit, and with what apparent result, may be best told in his own words of reply to a letter of inquiry from his old friend Gresley. The close of Gresley's letter ran thus:

“ And now, O most pugnacious of deacons, having administered to you a good rowing for your long and shameful silence, I demand information on the three following heads:—Have you been in the wars again; and if so, have you injured the pen and trigger finger? (Bear in mind, most reverend warrior, that carnal weapons are no

longer lawful to you ; and that if that bloodthirsty lout of a Needer again appears, all you can do is to excommunicate him.) 2. How did you get on with Robert of Dorminster ? Did he wear chain armour while in your presence, or his chaplain a shield and buckler, until he had finished plucking you ? And, thirdly, lastly, and especially, have you found any trace of that mysterious entity M. H. ? On this latter point my wife is crazy for news. Write soon and fully, if you love me or mine.”

In reply to this, Norton wrote at once a series of letters, and from these, and one or two to his father, this chapter of his life is to be most clearly gathered, as it stands recorded in his manifold-writer.

“ My dear Vicar.

“ You have been very merciful to my delinquencies as a correspondent, more merciful than I deserve, perhaps ; but in very

deed for months past I have had few hours I could call my own,—no leisure for long letters, far less for short ones. You say that the last you heard of me was in the ‘Flying Post,’ or about that date, when a brief scrawl told you that I was on my way to Dorminster, and the Doctor had done his best to make peace for me. Well, his lordship seems to have taken it very kindly, and was most courteously polite to me; though I contrived to put my foot in it at our very first interview. You know that the palace is at the head of one of those old-fashioned gardens that slope from the Minster down to the river, close to which stands the Church of St. Catharine. As I had never yet waited on a bishop, I determined to be there punctually at the appointed time, and actually waited in the adjoining churchyard until the clock struck eleven. As the last sound died away, I rang, and was at once admitted. ‘By appointment,

sir?' said a solemn personage in black. 'Yes,' said I, 'there is my card.' In two minutes the man returned, 'His lordship will see you.' I followed him, and was shown into a very quiet, thickly-carpeted room, lined from floor to ceiling with books, in the furthest corner of which, at a small writing-table, sat the Bishop. '*Mr. Norton, my lord,*' said the footman, and withdrew. His lordship took not the faintest notice of this announcement, but went calmly on with his writing,—as calmly as if the servant had merely brought him a fresh pen, or put coals on the fire,—while I stood waiting midway between him and the door.

"The more calmly he wrote, the more I fidgeted; until at last a singularly clear and soft voice said,

"'Mr. Norton, may I ask you to be good enough not to stand on one leg?'

"What I stammered out in reply *he* possibly may know, but to this hour I have

not the remotest conception. The horrible silence went on as before, growing, as I thought, more and more intense, when the writer suddenly turned to me, with a most gracious smile, and again spoke.

“‘ You are perhaps not aware, sir, that you have kept me waiting a whole hour?’

“‘ Utterly unaware of it, my lord,’ I replied, aghast; the hour named by your secretary was 11 A.M., and I actually waited for some time in the churchyard until the clock struck, that I might be punctual.’

“‘ My secretary, Mr. Norton, did not write to you. I did. Have you the note with you?’

“‘ I searched every pocket in vain.’*

“‘ I assure your lordship that I am deeply grieved to have kept you waiting,

* “ It was lucky for me, on the whole, that the fatal document was *not* in my pocket; for, on reading it at my lodgings, I found that the hour named was ten.”

but convinced that you must be labouring under some mistake.'

" 'I never make mistakes of this kind, Mr. Norton, and I very rudely allowed you to stand waiting just now, and to get a little fidgety, that this little incident might teach you to be more careful for the future. Trifling mistakes at starting sometimes generate fatal blunders at the goal. But now, pray be seated, and let us have a little talk.'

" And then, my dear vicar, to my utter surprise, he gave me the very jolliest examination I ever passed. He travelled from Dan to Beersheba in Church History, through the Liturgy, in and out of the Articles, glanced into the Greek Testament, Paley, and Hooker ; hunted out every hole and corner of my small range of knowledge; found out my weak points and helped me over the stile; my strong ones, and made the most of them ; ending with 'Very good,

Mr. Norton, if you satisfy my examining chaplain as well as you have done me, you will take a very good place. Good morning, I know all about you, Mr. Norton, and your work at Tregartha. Good morning.'

"I had scarcely reached the door, when that same mellow voice called out,

"'Mr. Norton.'

"'Yes, my lord.'

"'The church is militant, Mr. Norton, and I trust that you will be a good soldier under her banner, but no 'striker'—not even in Pendleton, if you happen to travel that way again.'

"So much for Robert of Dorminster.

"By Jove ! Gresley, in spite of his smiling face, that hawk's eye of his looks through a fellow ; but he only gave me one look when he got to the word 'Pendleton,' and that was quite enough.

"Now, as to my work here, how can I tell you what it is like ? I am supposed to look

after some three thousand souls, and my rector is in residence about six months of the year. There is more than enough work for a dozen curates. My flock are mostly poor, and live in dens, alleys, and filthy courts; and I now and then go to see a few stray sheep in the wilderness—just the worst cases picked out by my district visitors. But I never wrote a sermon in my life until I got here, never spoke fifty words in public, never visited a sick man, woman, or child.

“What then am I to do with such cases as come before me every week? Here are three taken at random out of my last week’s journal. I keep a journal still, you see.

“‘John Stodger,’ keeps an oil and grocery shop in Abbey Street; very ill, supposed to be dying; wife sent for me. Found him in a little, hot, stuffy bedroom behind the shop—in bed propped up with pillows. ‘I don’t think,’ says the wife, holding her apron to

her mouth between each word,—‘I don’t think John ’ave thought much of his future state ; just *you* say a word or two ; he don’t mind me.’

“ The whole place smelt of dirt, grease, and money ; and I thought of Dives.

“ ‘ Mr. Stodger,’ said I, approaching the bed, ‘ I am sorry to see you so poorly.’

“ ‘ I should think you was sorry, indeed,’ said a husky, creaking, voice from the heap of pillows, ‘ to think of its coming like this ’ere upon *me* at my time of life, me that’s never knowed a day’s illness, man and boy, this sixty year ; and now knocked over in a week, and can’t hardly draw my breath—I can’t. Ah, ’*tis* hard.’

“ ‘ Sixty years of good health ?’ said I. “ Why, you have been a lucky man, indeed ; it is seldom that God gives any of us such a long time as that.’

“ ‘ Then why couldn’t He have let me go right on, without being blocked up like this

here at my time o' life with this blessed bronchitis—just as the pork season was a-comin' in, too. Who's to look after that, I should like to know? You just tell me that!

“ ‘ Well,’ said I, ‘ it’s quite clear that *you* can’t look after it; perhaps it would be best for you to turn to something which you only *can* see to. You have had much goods laid up, it seems—for many years, too; but now you can do no more with them. Suppose a message comes for your soul to-night, are you ready?’

“ ‘ Don’t you go on supposing nothing of the kind. Just like all you ministers—nothing but dismals. I ain’t that degree bad yet awhiles; so mind now (a violent fit of coughing here nearly choked him)—you mind, now—I don’t want no prayers, unless they’ll stop this tearin’ cough o’ mine.’

“ ‘ Poor dear lamb! ’ says a greasy old woman in the corner who was officiating as

nurse, ‘he do suffer dreffull with his cough, and must be kept quiet.’

“What was to be said, Gresley, after that? Stodger’s wife suggested a prayer or two, at the same time mumbling something about the pork a-comin’ in, and nobody but her to look after it. When I called the next morning the wretched man was dead.

“‘He had been kep’ quiet and warm all night, and went off like a lamb—he did,’ so she said.

“No. 2, Grimes Court, six pair back; wife and five children; husband dying of drink. Visitor says I must go at once. Found out Grimes Court at last, and made my way up a filthy staircase into a bare, filthy, room; a pale, haggard woman opened the door, and begged me to come in. Three or four half-naked children, dirty and half starved, hung about her dress; furniture, a grimy table and two miserable chairs. On a bed in the corner—a mere heap of foul

rags—was the husband dying of inflammation of the bowels, and evidently in intense agony. He was a painter by trade, and had drunk himself to death with gin. But, quite conscious, he gazed at me with wide, staring, glassy eyes, and yet a look of such deep, piteous entreaty as pierced my very heart. I knelt down by the bedside—his wife standing by with streaming eyes; I said what few words I could to comfort the poor creature, and I am sure he heard and understood them. But his sole answer was, ‘Oh, my poor belly ! Oh, my poor belly !’ I prayed earnestly for him as that one terrible moan went on—‘Oh, my poor belly !’ No other word passed his lips while life remained, which was only for a few hours.

“ Case the third was that of a bricklayer, a man well to do in the world, in the prime of life, who had fallen off a scaffold and injured his spine. He was partially paralysed, and not in much pain when I saw

him ; but the doctor, whom I met at the door, spoke of his case as hopeless. He was not such a heathen as the other two, and listened readily to all I had to say. But when I spoke of the necessity of his being at peace and in good will with all, and suggested that if he had any little trouble on his mind that was against this, now was the time to get rid of it, he suddenly grew silent.

“ ‘The fact is,’ whispered his wife to me, ‘that he and his cousin Bill don’t get on very well, and just before you come in I was trying to get ’em to shake hands. Bill was willing enough, but my man he wouldn’t agree. They had a quarrel, you see, about a bit of property as come into the family years agone, and there it sticks in his mind.’

“ After some little talk, however, I induced Bill to come upstairs again, and at last persuaded them to shake hands. ‘ Well, well,’ said the dying man, ‘ let bygones be

bygones, Bill, though you and me was never very thick. But if I gets all right again, things is to be as they was—as they was, mind.*

“And from this, which he looked upon as a great concession, I could not get him to budge a single inch, though he lived for some days, and I saw him again more than once.

“You can pretty well guess, therefore, my dear friend, what my work is like from these stray examples; and how I wish sometimes that I had you for a rector instead of the poor old worn out croaker, who for six months in the year worries me to death with feeble complaints against ‘Romanism and the deadly poison of Tract

* This reminds one of old Philip English (A Jersey man, originally l'Anglais), who had been persecuted by John Hawthorne, of witch-time memory, and a violent quarrel ensued. When Philip lay on his death-bed, he consented to forgive his persecutor. “But if I get well,” said he, “I'll be hanged if I forgive him.”

Ninety.' Talk about missions to the heathen ten thousand miles away, in Borriaboolagah ! why not a special S. P. G. for the millions of pagans dying within sound of our own church bells ? We want a bishop for them in almost every city of the land.

* * * * *

" You ask about M. H. In my next you shall hear the little I have to tell."

In his next letter, therefore, he fulfils his promise as follows:—

" The fact is, my dear vicar, if it had been worth the telling, you would have heard all I have to say about M. H. long ago—as long ago as my first clear day in Dorminster.

" Of course, it was easy enough to discover Gascoigne Place, a little terrace of small houses about a mile out of the city on the Western Road, and most of them I found

devoted to lodgings. The door at No. 3 was opened for me by the landlady herself, Mrs. Diver, as the brass plate told me,—a little, dapper, talkative widow, who evidently thought I was on the look out for apartments fit for a reverend gentleman, which, as she phrased it, ‘I have had many of ’em in these very rooms.’

“My only plan, I saw, was to favour this notion as innocently as I could, and beat my way up by degrees to the special aim of my visit. I therefore admired the drawing-room, the hall, the staircase, and back garden intensely; and as these were all empty, I ventured to inquire if the next floor was empty. No; it was occupied just then by a couple of old ladies.

“‘Both old?’ said I.

“‘Well, yes, sir, pretty oldish, I’ll be bound, though ladies don’t mostly like to own it; *my* two there’s no mistake about, they are well on in their “ties,” as Miss

Roberts herself told me the other day, when the census man come round with his paper.'

"‘Roberts, Roberts?’ said I, ‘that’s not the Cornish Roberts, is it—a branch of the Hastings family that once lived in this terrace a year or two ago?’

"‘Not as I know of, sir; leastways, no party of the name of Hastings ever lived at No. 3, nor anywhere in the terrace, I’m pretty nigh sure; and I ought to know, for my poor, dear, Diver, that’s dead and gone, was postman on this very beat, where he was suddenly took, and that,’ said the widow with her apron raised to one eye, ‘was two-year agone now.’

"‘Mr. Diver was the very person who ought to have known;’ I replied, ‘and you don’t happen to remember his ever mentioning the name of Hastings?’

"‘It was *not* on his beat, sir, I am sure; and no such party ever took my rooms.’

"‘A widow lady and her daughter,’ I

repeated, ‘and the address, so I heard, 3,
Gascoigne Terrace.’

“‘Why it’s Marshall you’re thinking of,
sir ; she and her daughter come here the
winter before,—or two before,—I can’t say
exactly which now. They was only here a
month or so, when the mother was took
with fever, and went right off in a week ;
and the poor young thing was forced to go
out as a governess—leastways, so I heard,
somewhere down Bristol way.’

“‘What was Miss Marshall like,’ I in-
quired in as quiet a voice as I could sum-
mon.

“‘Like ?’ said Mrs. Diver, ‘why, like a
bit o’ sunshine she was, with eyes like ripe
nuts, as poor Diver used to say, hair to
match, and a voice like a bird.’

“‘Good Heavens ! Mrs. Diver,’ I cried
out, ‘it’s Miss Hastings herself you are
describing,—the very lady I am searching
for.’

“‘ Searching for a young lady ! ’ replied the amazed landlady ; ‘ I thought you was on the look out for lodgings ? ’

“ There abruptly our colloquy in reality broke up ; and there, my dear Gresley, my tidings of M. H. came suddenly to an end. In spite of all inquiries, nay, in spite of an offer of a five-pound note, I could not extract one iota more from Mrs. Diver. In fact, as she solemnly assured me, if a fifty-pound note was giv’ to her, she couldn’t tell me a syllable more. She’d never heard of Miss Marshall from that day to this.

“ And there was the end of it. •

“ The bright dream of my life, my old friend, now seems blotted out,—gone for ever ; for in spite of every possible inquiry, I can gain no information whatever, though in a great wilderness of a city like this, there may be a score of Marshalls within a mile of the spot from which I now write, or a hundred, for what I know ; so that I have

given up all hope at last, in utter despair. My only consolation is work, work, work, and of what sort the work is, you heard in my last epistle. Think of me sometimes in my lonely quarters, and when you can get away for a day or two, come and bestow them here."

A few lines from Gresley's reply to this letter will most aptly conclude this glimpse of Norton at work as a curate.

"My dear Norton," he began, "thanks for your long, descriptive, and rather plaintive letter, to which I can just now only send you the briefest reply. My first spare day shall be given to you and Dorminster. I want to see the Bishop, and that very soon, though I can't say exactly when it will be. In the meanwhile, don't take to groaning or despair. Your work is a grand one; and after *my* peaceful clodhoppers, and their quiet, bucolic, ways of heavy

ignorance, I almost envy you your visits to the heathen of Babylon. Of that, however, more when we meet."

The final paragraph ran thus:—"As to M. H., never give up hoping if you really care for her. In such cases, nothing is so likely as the improbable. If she had actually become *Mrs. Marshall*, you might reasonably growl; but the chances are at least fifty to one that she prefers waiting for the name of Norton. By the time you are a dean or an archdeacon, the grim fates will bring you together.

"Ever thine,

"T. G.

"P.S.—What a poet old Diver must have been, with his 'ripe nuts and birds' voices.' "

CHAPTER V.

THE DUKE OF DORMINSTER.

TOM GRESLEY's visit to his old friend was at last duly paid, and did much to cheer up the young curate in the midst of his uphill work in the wilderness of a great city. They talked over old school days and college days, a few old favourite books, and one or two of the flood of modern ones.

“Though, for my part,” said the vicar, “not above one in fifty of the multitude who rush into print every week seems to have anything whatever to say that might not have just as well have been left unsaid.

‘Fecundity without flavour,’ is, as the old doctor used to tell us at Tregartha, ‘the chief characteristic of the age.’”

“But leaving the world of books, my dear deacon, Tregartha reminds me of Pendleton, and Pendleton, not only of your recent fight and victory, but of some former exploit there, in the old, old, days of your juvenile innocence. Didn’t you go a sleep-walking there, in that same old tavern, and invade a young lady’s bedroom ?”

“Just the reverse. She invaded mine.”

“Ah ! yes, now I remember ; and some warlike but grateful papa embraced you, on the eve of departing for Timbuctoo, and vowed eternal gratitude. Have you ever heard of him since ?”

“Never. He was an old Colonel Dartlake, on his way to India, who, as you say, vowed eternal gratitude to me for saving his daughter Edith, and was going to make my fortune some day or other. But I lost

his address years ago, and he has never written to me from that day to this."

"He is busy perhaps," said Gresley, "making his own fortune, and so had no time to attend to yours. But all the same, Norton, don't be in a hurry to drop a friend when once made; men of that kind, in high position, often only want a reminder to stir them up to virtuous deeds, and one never knows where or when help may be needed. You're a lazy beggar never to have written, ages before you forgot or lost his address"

"It's too late now, for I have done both. Besides, what could a fellow three thousand miles off, in the hills of India, do for the Curate of St. Jerome's?"

"What could the mouse do for the lion, you mean?"

"No; what could the lion do for the mouse?"

"Do? Well, he might eat you, which just now would be a very serviceable action,

or simply roar against your enemies, or, if he fell in with Needer, swallow him at a gulp."

"And die of indigestion? The old colonel was far too good a fellow for that dismal fate."

"But, joking apart, Norton, the Dart-lakes are a Dorminster family, and, for all you know, may be settled within ten miles of you. Their people, I know, once had a place somewhere between this and Dor-mouth. Look up the old colonel; he may have a living in his gift."

"I am a bad beggar, Gresley, and never had a sixpence yet that I didn't make off my own bat."

"All the better for you, my friend; but don't carry your bat about with you wherever you go, for people, in general, hate the sight of the clever young man who is so clever as to dispense with his friends' help."

“ Gresley, you’re in a savage humour tonight, and say savage things in a smooth, oily manner that is highly unbecoming. Light your pipe, man, and blow off these ill-humours in fragrant smoke. In that pouch you will find cavendish of the true genus.”

The pipe of peace was smoked, a long talk followed, and the next day the vicar went back to his own parish.

A few months passed away, and Norton, having now taken priest’s orders, gave himself up entirely to his parish ; finding in it truer and deeper interest, and yet at times almost in despair at the infinitesimally small effect produced by days and nights of toil and anxious thought. Still, he worked on cheerfully and steadily ; and, acting on Gresley’s hint, began to make a few friends among the better class of his parishioners.

One of these, a man named Markham, was the owner of a great foundry within a

stone's throw of the Abbey Gates ; and at times employed some fifteen or sixteen hundred men. He was enormously wealthy, a shrewd, keen man of business, and not the least ashamed of having risen mainly by his own industry and perseverance. Among his men Norton had become a great favourite, winning his way first among the wives and children at home, and then gradually getting hold of the masters of the houses, by cheerful, kindly greetings when he chanced to meet them, a word or two in praise of their tidy rooms or bit of garden, and a careful avoidance of anything like preaching. In this way he had got fifty or sixty of them now and then to come to church, and—finding they were not preached at, or tormented with a long, heavy, service in which they could take no part—to declare that “ minister was a regular brick.”

This state of things pleased Markham, especially as the curate had never bowed

down to him as the big man of his parish, or even begged any special subscription ; and the end of it was that whenever the weather was fine, he drove in from his country-seat (ten miles out of Dorminster) to the Sunday morning service at St. Jerome's. He purposely threw himself in Norton's way ; and at last one morning said to him,

“ Mr. Norton, you have never yet come out to Dormouth Court, and my people would be very glad to show it to you. Will you remember that we dine at 7.30, and that there will always be a knife and fork for you and a hearty welcome. I always leave the foundry at six, when shall the carriage call for you ? ”

This was said so heartily and so cheerily that Norton could not but accept the invitation ; and the end of it was that he paid many visits to Dormouth Court, and greatly enjoyed the rest and fresh air. The ladies of the house made themselves as pleasant as

the master ; there was always a large circle of other guests, good wine, and good music, without a tinge of that affectation of grandeur which so often marks the *nouveaux riches* ; and this made it doubly pleasant.

“ In fact,” as Norton wrote to his old friend, “ Dormouth Court is my clover field, and after a week’s toil in the wilderness I find the pasture not at all bad for body or mind.”

To which Gresley said in reply, “ Clover is a very dangerous and seductive food, so be cautious, my dear Juan ; though I know you will say I am not writing to a portly alderman, but a hungry curate.”

Markham and his guest soon grew to be on intimate terms ; and had many a good talk over the affairs of the parish, the schools, and visitors’ work, in all of which Norton now found a ready and generous ally.

“ I cannot work for you, or with you, in person,” said his host, “ but my cheque-book,

remember, is always at your service if you will but come here and tell me what you want."

It was after some such talk as this, that, one evening, Markham, when the ladies had retired, put into his guest's hand a cutting from the county newspaper, which ran thus:

"Wanted, a Curate for '*Danbury*'; salary two hundred a year, with a good House. Apply," etc. etc.

"There," he said, "that's the very thing for you; and if we set to work at once, you may stand a fair chance for it. At all events, I have a special reason for asking you to be a candidate; and if you fail, you will still be no worse off than you are at present. The work, after St. Jerome's, is a mere nothing; and there is a capital house. What do you say?"

"Say?" replied Norton, "what can I say? except that I never heard of the parish of Danbury until this moment; and that the

curacy seems a first-rate one, which I should be thankful to have."

"It is not a parish at all, nor a curacy, but a set of alms-houses for old naval officers, with a chapel in the middle of the quadrangle, where the curate has a daily service, and full work on Sundays. The twenty old blue-jackets, and a dozen or two of cottagers who have of late years grown up about the old place, are all the souls you will have to care for, and you will be your own Rector. It got its name from the first Viscount Danbury, who, some three hundred years ago, built and endowed it ; and left its future management in the hands of trustees.

"These trustees are now twenty in number, and I am one of them ; ready, too, to vote for you if you become a candidate. There, Mr. Norton, now you have a full, true, and particular account of the whole business, as far as I know it, and you must judge for yourself. But the sooner I have your decision the better."

"That," replied Norton, "you can have at once. I decide on becoming a candidate."

"And that," said his host, "is one clear step towards success. Lose no time in writing to the Secretary of the Trustees, at Danbury; and I will set to work among my brother trustees, if any stray votes are still to be picked up. Our worst opponent will be the old Duke of Dorminster, who has, I hear, a candidate of his own in the field, whom he wants to cram down the trustees' throats as the best man. But *that* they won't stand, nor will I. Danbury itself is halfway between this place and the city, just outside the old Park Gates, so that the Duke looks upon it rather in the light of a family living, and himself as patron. Come into the library and write at once to Searl, the secretary. He is an old slow coach, and no time is to be lost."

Within a couple of days from that time Norton had obtained the necessary papers

and information, and formally become a candidate. But, after this, he could gain little or no information. Searl was not only slow, but muddle-headed. He not only wrote a villainous scrawl, but was almost unintelligible even when one had deciphered his M.S. Week after week passed away, and Norton could gain no distinct answer either to any note of enquiry or by calling in person at Danbury. The secretary was always either out, or engaged. Of Mr. Markham, oddly enough, he had neither seen nor heard anything since his last visit to Dormouth Court.

So, there was nothing for it but to wait in patience.

At last, when he had almost given up all hope, came the following Letter : —

“ *The Foundry.*

“ My dear Sir,

“ You have been wondering, I dare say, what had become of me and all my

fine promises of setting to work *in re* Danbury ; thought, perhaps, I had dropped you over. If so, you dont know John Markham. Once I take a man up, I never let him go until he is the right man in the right place. I have much to say, and little time to say it in ; still less for calling, or I would drive round.

" You haven't got much out of Searl, I expect ; who ever *could* out of a man with a head like his ? Why his brains don't weigh an ounce, I'll swear. So, I had better tell you the whole story.

" To begin with, there were more than sixty candidates. Good Heavens ! all hungry curates, most of them with wives and children, and *all* with the most wonderful testimonials. According to their friends' account the whole sixty were admirable in the pulpit, pious, active, intelligent, orthodox ; in a word, all exactly fitted to be Curates of Danbury. I had no notion until

then how many paragons of virtue were to be found in one order of the ministry. The trustees met, and our first business was to cut down the number of sixty, by severe sifting, to forty ; the forty to twenty, twelve, and finally to six. By dint of sheer impudence and good luck, I have managed to keep your name within the reserved number, down to six, who are to come personally before the board on Thursday next. You will all be looked at, and one will be chosen. More than that I can hardly say ; but our chance of success is small. The Duke's candidate is, I find, his own chaplain, Fellow of his college, and altogether a great swell ; whom his noble master is anxious to provide for in the easiest and cheapest fashion. In fact, he has said to him, ' If you would like to be Curate of Danbury, I will get it for you.'

" Now this is exactly what some of the trustees don't like ; and there has been a

great split in the board ; about a half bowing down to my lord Duke, and the others determined to bring in a candidate of their own. I join neither party, but simply mean to vote for the best man, whose name you know. I don't choose to be dictated to by his grace the duke, or his highness old Roger Dawson, surgeon to the Dorminster Hospital, who leads the other clique. Both say, ' You shall vote for us ; ' I say, John Markham will see you hanged first. But I forget that I am writing to the clergy, and must use proper language. I scarcely know one other of my brother-trustees, more than by name ; but they all seem red-hot in this business, and ready to die rather than be trampled on. I shall be at the meeting on Thursday, and expect to see you.

" Faithfully yours,

" J. MARKHAM."

The next day Norton received a formal notice from the secretary of his being one of the selected six, and having to appear before the board on a certain Thursday at Danbury.

Twelve o'clock was the time appointed, and punctually at that hour Markham set him down at Danbury Gates.

"I will drive you there myself," said his patron, and show the fellows that I am in earnest. "Perhaps it may gain you a stray vote."

The result had better be told in Norton's own words to his father, written in hot haste, on the day after the election.

"My good friend Markham having set me down at the gates, and whispered to me, 'We shall expect you to-night at dinner whichever way the battle goes' an old servant, in a round jacket and brass buttons, conveyed me down to the end of a long passage, and ushered me into a small par-

lour where sat four other gentlemen in white ties and clerical coats. The sixth candidate (so I afterwards learned) was a curate in Yorkshire and unable to attend; so there was but five of us, and a more miserably awkward and ill-at-ease party than we at first were I never beheld. We did not know each other's names, and sat glaring at one another with eyes of curious rivalry and pretended unconcern, for the first few minutes, until one man in utter desperation broke the ice for us by taking a book out of his pocket, and reading, or pretending to read, from it, that odd line of Southey's

'A party in a parlour sat, all silent, and all damned.'

There was no standing this, and we all at once broke out into a hearty laugh, and began talking away as cheerily and heartily as if we had been old friends met again

after long separation. Every one of us in turn, told more or less of his history, who he was, where he had been working, and what chances he thought he had of success. Even Longford, the duke's candidate, who was rather high and mighty at first, relaxed, and condescended to tell us in confidence, that his chances were good. ‘Of course, he didn’t mean to say that the thing was by any means settled; but he knew that the duke’s interest was strong, and that a large number of trustees had promised to vote for him.’

“The odd thing was that, though canvassing among the committee had been strictly forbidden, every fellow seemed to know how many votes he had secured to him. There we sat for two mortal hours, talking, gossiping, and wondering when the conclave in the board-room would set to work; and then to our intense relief the janitor in blue brought us in a mighty tankard of ale

and some bread and cheese. This was received with great applause, and for awhile we were too busy to talk. But all at once came blue jacket again, and we were each called in turn before the board, looked at, cross-questioned, examined, and sent back to the parlour to await further orders.

“The hour that followed this ordeal was the most intolerable of the day. Each one of us was in reality slightly sanguine after his interview with the board, and yet each (except Longford) faintly protested that he hadn’t a chance. And thus we all sat wearily trying to while away the time; knowing that the next summons would be for the successful candidate to go down that long passage again, enter the board-room, and be complimented by the chairman. How long we waited I don’t know. It seemed a week. But at last, far away in the distance was heard the faint sound of an approaching footstep, and we knew that

the fatal moment had arrived. In another minute the step was at the door, the handle moved, and all eyes turned insensibly to Longford. He was pale with intense excitement, and had half risen from his seat, as if in anticipation, when the door suddenly opened, and blue jacket said in his cheeriest voice, as if hailing an old comrade,

“The Reverend Mr. Norton is wanted if *you* please.”

Utterly amazed and half incredulous, I started up at these words.

“Are you sure,” said I, “about the name?”

“Quite sure, sir; as sure as I be of my own, Joe Simmons. Had it from the captain’s own self. Can’t be no mistake.”

“In less than five minutes, my dear father, I was back again in that little parlour, now more silent and strange than ever, having been elected Curate of Danbury, and congratulated by the old admiral

in the chair on my admirable testimonials, and the pleasure the board felt in unanimously choosing so eligible a candidate. Longford was the only fellow who didn't shake me heartily by the hand and wish me joy of my success.

“ He muttered something about ‘ always thinking it would be so, and a city job of course,’ and wished me an icy good morning. This only made the other men more cordial, and so, hardly knowing whether I stood on my head or my heels, I made my way into Markham’s carriage at the gate, and was bowled away as in a triumphal car to Dormouth Court.

“ My success astounded me. There were fifteen or sixteen trustees present, so I guessed, and out of these I knew only of a single vote being mine. Two hundred a year and a furnished house; coals, candles, and a garden! Why it’s better than half the vicarages going. I shall have one of

my sisters to live with me, I exclaimed in a joyful voice, to my good friend and ally Markham. ‘And I have never yet thanked you for all you have done.’

“‘Don’t thank me, Norton,’ said the old man; ‘I want no thanks. The victory was so splendid and so complete, that his majesty of Dorminster will never survive it; and Roger Dawson will have to prescribe for his own fit of the gout. Good Lord, what a fluke it was, too! Better than a thousand thanks.’

“And then he told me as we rode home to dinner the story of the election, which you must *not* publish, even in brief as I send it.

“‘There never was such a fluke, Norton; never, since flukes were invented, and they first came in with anchors. (The only joke I ever knew him make.) When the board first met, there was a furious wrangle for about two hours between the two rival

factions : one for the Duke's man, and the other for some curate down in Yorkshire who could't get away from his work ; each solemnly declaring that nothing should induce them to vote for any other but their own candidate. They seemed to be about equal in number, and it looked like a drawn game.

" 'At last, in sheer desperation, you were all called in, and looked at ; and then it was agreed to settle the matter by balloting ; the lowest candidate being cast out at each round. The first time, the three lowest men had *one* vote each ; the two favourites, each six. Then, lots were twice drawn among the three, and in each turn you gained a vote. This made you *three* ! Then, old Dawson's party held a secret conference in the corner of the room. They saw that at the next ballot you must go out, and if the three votes went over to Longford, their man was done for, and the Duke's secure. And,

so, rather than this should happen, they gave up the poor curate in Yorkshire, and then, to the amazement of the rest of the room, the next poll stood thus:

Norton . . . 9
Longford . . 6

and, from being at the bottom, you came out at the top of the list. There never was such a victory, Norton, and we will tap a bottle of 1820 port to-night in honour of it. But, again I say, don't thank me. I gave you but one vote. In fact, you owe far more to a new trustee, a man whom I had never seen before, an old white-haired General, who, as soon as he found out your name and heard from me where you came from, was most violent in your favour. He gave old Dawson's people no rest, until they at last agreed to his proposal. You never told me that you had a friend on the board?"

"'Nor have I,' said I, 'I don't even

know a single name among the trustees. Searl declined to reveal them, and informed me that canvassing was strictly forbidden.'

"‘So it was, but everybody canvassed, all the same; and old General Dartlake seemed to know all about you, and begged me to give you his card. There it is.’

"It was my turn to be amazed now, for on the card I read,

‘General Dartlake,
‘Saltram.’

"It was the old colonel of my old Pendleton adventure at the ‘Royal Oak,’ of which Jenny or Sophy will tell you all the particulars if you have forgotten them.

"And now, my dear father, this long weary letter must come to an end; for morning is not far off, and even 1820 port won’t save a fellow from being sleepy. I must be up betimes, too, as my host starts for the

foundry punctually at 8 A.M. Curate of Danbury ! I can hardly believe it as I sign myself ever yours,

“H. N.”

“Talk of vicarages ?” wrote Gresley when he heard the news ; “my dear Danbury, unless you have episcopal blood in your veins, or in some way belong to the sacred family of rural deans, archdeacons, or canons, there is no chance for you of anything half so good as your little domain among the old sea-kings. The inferior order of clergy were meant and made to gaze on the loaves and fishes afar off. Look at me. Twenty years in Holy Orders, age nearly fifty, a nominal income of £300, a small, damp, badly-built house, with half an acre of poor soil, called glebe, and out of these revenues to pay highway rates, poor rates, insurance, house-tax, and every species of extortion that lurks under that hideous word tax, from

all which enormities, ‘O fortunate nimium,’ the curate of Danbury is free. I can fancy you in that serene retreat untroubled by suffering Dissenters and pugnacious Churchmen, no vestry meetings, no paupers, no school inspectors, no conscience-clause ; all the machinery well oiled, and in good repair, a good, tight, ship, and you monarch of the quarter-deck. What a change for you after your battles in the wilderness ! quiet mornings among your books ; long, cosy evenings for pen and ink ; and a tough yarn now and then from one of the old salts ! If I were not the most humble and contented of vicars, I should envy you. But, joking apart, Juan, God bless you in your new work and home. *Vale.*”

CHAPTER VI.

OLD ACQUAINTANCES.

MANY things had to be done before Norton could settle down in his new home. His own rector had to find a new curate, the bishop had to be consulted, and the trustees persuaded to put off his coming to Danbury to the remotest possible date. For some time, therefore, he was busy enough ; but on the very first of his leisure days he determined to pay a visit to 'Saltram,' and thank his old friend the general for such timely help at the election. What excuse to make for his long silence he could not,

even after much thought, determine ; and therefore wisely resolved to let things take their own course. Of a welcome he felt certain ; and he was far too sensible of the old man's kindness to hesitate about expressing his gratitude at the earliest opportunity.

Saltram, he found, was the name of a quiet old manor house on the banks of the Dor, about three miles out of the city ; and one fine afternoon in October, Norton set out for his walk across the fields. Autumn, with fiery finger, had touched the trees and hedgerows ; and as he strolled on through the quiet meadows, and watched a ruddy sunset flooding all the hills with sober, yellow, light, the strange adventure of Pendleton came back vividly on his mind.

He recalled the hearty grasp of the old man, and his hasty words of earnest thanks, the pale, weird, face of the young girl, and her tenderly whispered “ Good-bye, Henry

Norton." And then he wondered whether he should see her again, and find her as strangely beautiful as ever. Of her sister he had no remembrance, but Edith's face, and her eyes, full of dreamy light, were things not to be forgotten.

An hour's walk brought him to the river; and crossing this by a little wooden bridge, he passed suddenly from bright, ruddy, sunlight into the dark, cool, shade of an avenue of lime-trees. The change was so sudden that, although he at once heard footsteps ahead of him on the thick carpet of fallen leaves, it was difficult at first to make out the whereabouts of his fellow-traveller. But in a moment his eyes got used to the change of light, and he saw a hundred yards or so ahead of him an old man in a brown shooting-jacket, striding away at a great pace towards the house, which could now be clearly seen at the end of the avenue.

It was no easy task to get up with the

old fellow, whom he took to be a game-keeper, by the gun over his shoulder. But he overtook him at last, and was on the point of speaking, when a closer look told him that his companion was no other than the general himself.

“I think,” said Norton, taking off his hat,
“I am speaking to General Dartlake?”

“Quite right, young sir,” replied a cheery voice, “and who may you—Why, God bless my soul, it’s young Norton himself! Welcome, a thousand times welcome to Saltram.”

In the eagerness of his welcome the old man fairly forgot himself, flung down his gun, luckily unloaded, and then shook his guest by the hand as if he would wring it off.

“And so you thought I was the keeper, did you?” said the General, after their first greetings were over. “Well, you’re not so very far wrong; old Giles and I profess to

do the work between us; but there isn't much game to look after, my labourers don't poach, and Giles does not overwork himself. And in this old Shikary's coat, I am far more like a clod or a scarecrow than an old Indian; battered and knocked about from pillar to post as I have been, no wonder you didn't recognize me. But I have outlived it all, and come back to the old country again, please God, for a few years' rest. My sight is the only thing that really fails, or I should have known you in a moment the other day at Danbury. Your name I didn't catch, as I ought to have done, at first, amidst all the noisy squabble and row that was going on, and I was too blind to see you across that long table."

"And I," said Norton, "was too blind and too bewildered with surprise to see anybody but the chairman, who told me of my good fortune, or at first to believe it when told."

“We had a hard fight for it, Norton ; but as soon as I found out who you were, I gave Dawson’s side no rest until they agreed to bring you in. It was rather like biting off one’s nose to spite the face ; but as they couldn’t select their own man, the next best thing was to checkmate the duke.”

“It was a lucky checkmate for me,” replied Norton, “and I have yet to thank you for making the first move towards it.”

“Thanks ?” said the old man ; “have you forgotten that all the debt is on my side, and that you once did me a service that can never be repaid ?”

As he said this they emerged from the avenue, and came into a broad, sunny, garden, laid out in simple, quiet beauty, with beds of china-asters, fuchsias, and mignonette, that told of something more than a gardener’s care.

“And now that we are at home, Norton, let me tell you that at all times and all

seasons Saltram is open to you, and that your welcome can never be worn out. By the bye, Edith knows nothing of your being here, as I said not a word about Danbury. We will drop in upon her unawares. She is much altered—broken down, in fact, with nursing a sick husband, who, I fear, has come home to die of sunstroke and a host of other Indian miseries, of which more another day."

By this time they had reached the house, a square, low range of building, built some twenty years before by another old Indian, somewhat in bungalow fashion, with all the rooms on one storey. The house was thickly covered with westeria, passion-flower, roses, and virginia creeper, now tinted with the full dying splendour of autumn; and all the windows in the front side opened down to the ground.

"We shall find her most likely in the library."

So saying, the General stepped in through an open window into a large room, well furnished with books, couches, and easy-chairs ; the floor covered with thick Indian carpet that deadened every sound.

As they entered, Norton saw at the further end a lady busily engaged in writing at a tall desk, dressed in some light Indian fabric, with an abundance of fair hair falling loosely over her shoulders, and a bunch of white jasmine on her bosom, its only ornament.

“ Edith, my dear, I have brought an old friend to see you.”

She started at the sound of her father’s voice, but came forward with easy grace to greet the stranger and bid him welcome.

But before she had taken three steps towards them she suddenly stopped ; a sudden flush of colour passed over her pale face, and her eyes filled with the light of sudden tears as she cried out,

"Oh, papa, how shameful of you to take me by surprise in this way! and with such a friend, too, as Mr. Norton."

"The very reason of all reasons, my dear, for standing on no ceremony. If it had been a mere acquaintance, you should have had due notice, and received him with all state in the drawing-room. Now, all you will have to do is to carry him off into the garden and talk over old times, while I get rid of my shooting-rob~~e~~s, and tell Thompson to get ready Mr. Norton's room in time for dinner."

"Pray don't trouble yourself to do that," interrupted Norton, "I must be back in Dorminster in less—"

"You will not leave Saltram to-night, my dear young sir, even if the bishop himself is waiting for you. To-morrow morning, as early as you please, Sam shall drive you into the city, but to-night you are mine. Take him away, Edith, and look sharply after him till I return."

"I am afraid, Mr. Norton," said a soft, low voice, "that you must do as you are bid; the General is a terrible tyrant in this house, and *will* have his own way."

"When he *can*, when he *can*, Eadie," replied the old man as he left the room; and then the two young people passed out at the open window.

For a few moments both were silent, and Norton found himself looking intently at the face of his companion, and wondering what change had passed over it since their last meeting that the mere passage from girlhood to womanly beauty would not account for. She was more beautiful than ever; the same dreamy grey eyes, the same inexpressible grace and sweetness of expression; and over all had passed a shadow of he knew not what, that had left behind it a touch of hardness and defiance that seemed altogether out of place.

Suddenly, however, she looked up; their

eyes met, and he hastened, in rather a hurried and confused manner, to apologize for his seeming rudeness.

“Pray, forgive me,” he said, “for staring at you in such a fierce way, but your eyes had in them just now that very look they had years ago, when you said ‘Good-bye, Henry Norton,’ in the old coffee-room at Pendleton, though I really for the moment forgot altogether whose eyes they were.”

“Do you remember now?” she answered, with a bright smile. “It seems ages and ages ago, doesn’t it? But I have long since given up my old, naughty, habit of wandering, and become a very staid, old married woman. Do I not look like it?”

“Not very, very, aged yet, and not so very staid,” said Norton; “and for the best of reasons, there are some faces that never grow old, and some people who are always young, and you are one of them, I think.”

“I ought to thank you, I suppose, Mr.

Norton, for so prettily turned a compliment, but I see that you are merely joking, and really think me as odd and old-fashioned a body as ever."

"The same," he said, "and yet strangely changed; older, and yet as young as ever. What a mystery the human face is, with all its incessant changes and hidden flashes of light and meaning, coming and going, fading and dawning,—just as the spirit within is darkened or full of light, and the heart beats with joy or sorrow."

"Ah! now," she answered, with a quiet smile, "now you are trying to puzzle me with philosophy, and your riddle about 'older and as young as ever' is only fit for the sphinx; I never was good at riddles."

"And yet," said Norton, "you know what I mean, and have seen such faces as I spoke of."

"I plead guilty," she replied; "but we are quite forgetting papa's orders about 'old

times,' so begin at once, and tell the old married lady with the changed unchangeable face all about yourself, and what you have been doing since we last met. Have you become learned in the law, physic, or divinity?"

"Do I look like a lawyer?"

"Not much."

"A parson?"

"Still less. You reason like a learned counsel; and with that round felt hat, and, I was going to say, shooting-jacket, but I see now it is of a soberer style of garment, your general appearance is not clerical."

"And yet I am Curate of Danbury, for all that."

"Reverend sir, I entreat your pardon for such levity of speech. I ought to have detected the embryo rector and bishop long before this; but in my young days parsons all wore the sacred chimney-pot."

"Fast going out, I assure you, Miss

Dartlake,—that is, I beg ten thousand pardons, for a moment I forgot what the General told me,—and I have never yet inquired for your husband, Mr. ——”

“Jervis. Thank you, he is an utter invalid; so much so, that I can scarcely ever leave his room. And did he never mention my name, or is your memory as treacherous about names as about eyes?”

“He merely said your husband had come home in broken health, and then suddenly ushered me into the library without a word more of warning. You know Danbury, of course?”

“Scarcely more than by name; a sort of asylum of some kind, but I have never seen it.”

“It is a charming old place,” replied Norton, “a quiet home for old naval captains after long service, with a grand old hall and reading-room, a chapel, library, and cloisters, to say nothing of the curate’s

house. I am to be a kind of ecclesiastical admiral, I believe ; and it is to the lucky fact of your father being one of the trustees that I owe my good fortune of seeing him again."

"But you never wrote to us in India?"

"No ; I waited for the General to open the correspondence, I being such a youngster, and then the time went by, and I lost his card and address, after all our solemn pledges of writing."

"But he never forgot you, Mr. Norton, nor ceased to thank you in his heart ; and even at his busiest time, when that terrible mutiny broke out, often mentioned your name. 'The fighting Sahib,' as the men called him, scarcely ever touched pens and ink, and his letters to England all those years might be counted on the fingers. So don't be too hard on him, or think him utterly ungrateful."

"Ungrateful!" replied Norton ; "he has

proved his gratitude for a mere trifling service, as few men ever prove it. It is to him I owe my election to Danbury, though he won't allow me to thank him as I ought."

"And here he comes, Mr. Norton, to speak for himself; and I must now be off to my work indoors, for I have much to do before we meet at dinner."

"Yes, my child," said the old man, "I think you must go, for I heard Jervis's bell ring while dressing; and no doubt he wants his nurse again after an hour's absence,—selfish as all sick men are."

The old General, now dressed for dinner, with a smart flower in his coat, was a very different looking man from the old game-keeper in his rusty shooting-jacket. He wore a bright, healthy, look, such as few Indians retain after long service, and his cheek, the colour of a ruddy apple, hardened and bronzed by hard work and expo-

sure in all weathers, showed little trace of age, though his hair and beard were white as snow. It was with a cheery smile and a hearty voice that he now turned to Norton.

“And so, young sir, you have been chatting of old times, eh? And, by the last words that I caught a sound of as I came in, you were talking of thanks due to me. Now discard that notion altogether. There is nothing in the world I hate so much as being thanked; besides, was I not all those years away in India without sending you one line, after all my loud words, too? You forgot me, of course, but I had no right even to seem to forget you; and then came this lucky chance of Danbury, to prove to you that I had *not* forgotten. But tell me how is your old acquaintance, the little sleep-walker, looking? Should you have known her?”

“Oh! yes, at once. She is the same charming, quaint little spirit as ever, and

yet changed, I know not how. There is a look about her face that I can't make out; the old, strange, sweet smile of light is there at times, but every now and then it seems to die out altogether, and leave behind it a shadow of weariness and startled fear, that—”

“The infernal scoundrel!” interrupted the old general; “it's all his doing, I verily believe.”

“Whose doing, if I may ask?” inquired Norton.

“Her husband's,—that fellow Jervis. It is two years now since my darling began to wear that terrible stony look, which you have found out at once. He was a staff surgeon to a regiment close to us, when we first met him; a shrewd, clever, dashing young fellow, who carried all before him among us old fellows, clever in his profession, and a great favourite among the women. Poor Edith! he won her heart, I

think at first by his care of me after a desperate bit of work at Khyber, where his men and ours were both terribly cut up ; and then he played his cards well all that winter, and married her in the spring ; and just then his regiment was ordered off three or four hundred miles up the country, to some place where he had been before. At first, all seemed to go well and brightly enough with her ; but then we saw nothing, and heard next to nothing of them for many a long weary day, when he was sent up to the hills, to our old station, a broken invalid ; and so came back with me to England.” .

“ And what says Mrs. Jervis herself ? ”

“ Not a word ; not a single word can I get out of her. She has never uttered a sound of complaint against him, and, though I have cross-examined her fifty times, I can find out nothing. What devil’s work he has been up to, Heaven only knows ; but

that there is some villainy at the root of it all, I am as convinced as that I am now alive. Meanwhile, he is as smooth and fair-spoken to her, and to every one else, as man can be. She waits on him, night and day, and says nothing — absolutely nothing."

"And is he really ill?" said Norton.

"Beyond all doubt, he's ill enough; sun-stroke and dysentery are no trifles, and both have befallen him. A man cannot play false in such matters. He looks as if there were but one step between him and the 'Dead March'—"

"Or the 'Rogue's March,'" interrupted the curate.

"Well said, Norton; between the rogue and the 'Rogue's March.' That's it to a T. But not a word, not a whisper of this, to any living soul; she must never suspect that I suspect,—far less that you have any inkling of mischief going on. I have no

business, in fact, and never meant, to trouble you with my miseries ; but old age is loquacious. Come away indoors, and let us see if there be any dinner in the land, and a glass of old wine to welcome an old friend. There goes the first bell."

The dinner that evening was of the quietest, pleasantest, kind ; viands of the best, well cooked ; wine, old and choice ; attendance, two old military servants, who moved about with noiseless steps, and anticipated the wants of the guests before they were expressed.

"Eadie won't leave us," said the General, as the servants withdrew ; "so now for a cosy chat. Tell us, Norton, all about yourself, and what you have been doing in the good city of Dorminster ; and when you are tired, she shall play to us Beethoven's ' Dream Fugue.' "

With two such eager listeners, Norton's task was a pleasant one ; and the evening

sped swiftly away, as he drew for them pictures of his life and doings at Tregartha, and among the heathen in Babylon. And then for an hour, as the two men smoked a final pipe, the young girl found in the passionate melodies of the great master utterance for her own unknown sorrows.

It was the first of many such evenings at Saltram.

CHAPTER VII.

LIFE AT DANBURY.

MONTHS passed away, and Norton gradually and happily settled down at his new work, which, after the bewildering toil in Babylon, was light indeed. It was enough, nevertheless, to keep his thoughts fairly employed, but left him abundant leisure for work among his books. The library was neither large nor well-chosen, and admirably unsuited for the old sailors; but it contained many volumes which the curate had never seen, and specially a good collection of the English dramatists, and poets, and essayists. At

these, with a hint now and then from his old friend, Gresley, he set resolutely to work, renewing and expanding an acquaintance with many a favourite whom he had begun to know in days of far scantier leisure.

With an odd volume as a companion, he frequently strolled over to Saltram, and there spent many an evening even more happily than the first; always sure of one ready and attentive listener, even when the general himself was too sleepy to be attentive, or was otherwise engaged.

His intimacy there, in fact, was ripening into a steady friendship of the simplest and purest kind. Edith Jervis, though deeply influenced by a dreamy imagination, was a woman of strong intellect and refined taste. She had read many books, and seen not a few men of various ranks and positions in life, of widely different powers and pursuits, and thus gathered a quiet store of experi-

ence, that made her a most pleasant companion.

In the young curate's company, her silence and reserve gradually wore off; and, in fact, as her father said, she began to come out of her shell. And, if but for a time, the change was a happy one for all parties. The old weary look on her face grew at least less frequent, though, at times, it was as sadly apparent as ever.

Her husband grew weaker, and his condition far more perilous, as the months went by, so Norton heard from the old man; but the wife never spoke of him, or alluded to his state, and, after the General's caution at their first meeting, the curate never mentioned it in her presence.

None the less keenly, however, did he watch the pale face and tell-tale eyes of the patient unwearied nurse; and none the less frequently speculate as to the secret cause of her suffering. And, watching in this

way, he saw enough to convince him that the old root of misery, whatever it might be, still remained. At such times, he did his utmost and best to while away her thoughts from herself, and by bright, cheerful, talk, or the help of some favourite book, a stroll in the gardens, or as a listener to the music of Beethoven and Schubert he often succeeded.

If at all conscious of this, his increased attention, Edith Jervis never showed that she felt and was grateful for it, either by open word or single act ; but there were times when her tender and gracious dignity of manner grew even more than usually gracious, and the smile upon her face spoke when her lips were silent.

One thing struck Norton as specially notable. Her father had often spoken to him of the glorious beauty of her voice before her marriage ; but, though she often played—and music of deep and passionate

emotion,—she never sang, nor did the old man dare to ask her.

“The sound of her voice in the old days,” said the General, “filled all the house with sunshine. Her sister, the wife of a tough old major in the Dragoons, had neither ear nor taste for music, but to Eadie it was meat and drink ; she was like a happy bird. I could strangle that fellow, with pleasure, if there was but ground for laying hands on him ; and she more a slave to him than ever. He is breaking her heart, Norton, with his cursed smooth tongue, here in my own house, and yet I can do nothing.”

It was doubly clear, therefore, that any attempt on Norton’s part would be even more useless, or dangerous.

And many a time did he go back to his quiet domain at Danbury with a weary consciousness of being unable to render help to one who was not only helpless, but deserving of infinite pity.

And still the days and months went on.

At last, however, though he wrote not a word of his trouble, his letters to Gresley carried with them a tinge of sadness, which the old friend and companion was not slow to detect, and to condemn in his usual jocose fashion, while he pointed out to Norton a new line of work, which he thought might tend to rouse him up to a brighter view of things.

"I hardly know," he said, "what new vein of sentiment is creeping over you, but you are growing morbid, and slightly hysterical beyond a doubt. Are you falling in love again? If so, who is the new divinity? You don't even mention her name, and I thought you had fairly done with the verb 'amo' for the present. What business have you, 'in the very flower of youth, to be talking about the sadness of life and the deceitfulness of the world? Why, even your books will teach you better philosophy

than this nonsense. What says your favourite Carlyle ?

“ ‘ There is a perennial nobleness, and even sacredness, in work. Were he never so benighted, forgetful of his high calling, there is always hope in a man that actually and earnestly works ; in idleness alone is perpetual despair. Work, never so mammonish and mean, *is* in communication with nature ; the real desire to get work done will itself lead one more and more to truth, —to nature’s appointments and regulations, which are truth.’

“ Your work, O Reverend Divine, is neither mean nor mammonish ; so, rouse yourself—turn to, man ; order a sheaf of goodly quill pens, and a gallon of ink, and set to work at once. Take any one of those subjects which we talked over when I was last in Dorminster ; write a good, rattling, cheerful paper, and send it off to one of the leading reviews. If you have really any-

thing to say, and say it well, the editor will be sure to print; or, if not, you will have delivered your soul. Anyhow, no more dismals, or I will positively write to the trustees, and have you hauled over the coals on the quarter-deck, with all the old salts looking on.

“ What more can I say to cheer you ? You live in the very centre of life, bustle, excitement, and news,—I here, in the lonely wilderness. You peruse daily papers, and get your intelligence hot and hot; no need, therefore, to advertise you of the glorious news from the Crimea last week. At first, I didn’t believe it; but when assured of the truth, I ordered a pot of porter and a peal of bells. In the evening I got up a little rustic illumination; necessity, you know, is the mother of invention, so, having no lamps, and no means of getting any, I stuck a store of Price’s composites into an old hoop, which I cut in half for

the nonce, and fixed arch-wise over the top of the vicarage gates. The effect was unique and imposing. The church singers chirped like so many grasshoppers on my lawn, and many of my parishioners, who came in to stare at the flags and transparencies in the windows, joined in the chirping, and in the swallowing of the ale I had set forth for the songsters of Israel.

“ You feel better now, I am sure.

“ On Wednesday we had a large cattle fair, the first ever holden in the parish. Five hundred beasts, exclusive of buyers and sellers, and sixteen hundred sheep ! We are growing into importance ! By-and-by, perhaps, we shall send members to Parliament ; our parish has sent many to prison ; and if, as old Cobbett avers, ‘ The House of Commons is a den of thieves,’ I am quite sure we should never be in want of eligible candidates. Now, for the weather, and my sheet is full. It has been and

is wet and washy—‘no end;’ it rains all day and every day. Dan Ovid, therefore, was not weather-wise when he wrote,

“‘ Nulla dies adeo est Australibus humida nimbis
Non intermissis ut fluat imber aquis.’

“Forgive all this sheet of nonsense,—and, for Heaven’s sake, again I say, ‘Get out of the dismal.’

“One more word and I have done.

“You remember Dick Trevanion, in the old Tregartha days? He has suddenly turned up in my parish, on a visit to a neighbouring squire, after a smart taste of service at the Alma. I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw him coming in at the vicarage gates. Thus I elegised the young ensign, to his great delight.

“*In mei amici redditum.*

“*Vera loqui Vatem pietas testatur Amici*
Sole sub eo qui procul arma tulit.
Credere vix possum, post tanta pericula terræ
Et maris, egregium rursus adesse Ducem.

“Ante meos oculos volitare videtur imago
 Militis;—exagitat pectora nostra timor.
 Fallor? an extremis rediit Dux noster ab Indis?
 Quisquis es, oranti tu mihi vera refer.
 “Pone metus, non vana oculos deludit imago,
 Da dextræ dextram jungere,’ miles ait.
 Nec mora; conjunctis manibus,—patet Ille fidelis,
 Musaque solicitat, quâ valet arte, lyram.

“T. G.”

This letter did Norton good, and for a time thoroughly roused him from what his old friend called “the dismals.” He set to work vigorously with pen and ink, spent a whole month’s leisure on ‘*The Use and Necessity of Pain*,’ a topic which he had carefully studied, and sent it off when completed to the editor of the famous ‘A. B. Review.’ It came back to him in two days, with a cold, stiff note, saying, “The editor regretted that he could not make use of Mr. Norton’s article.” No doubt, as Gresley observed, he had now delivered his soul; but he felt little better for the process. He had always heard that editors were a set of disagreeable prigs,

who favoured only their own relations and friends, and he now felt inclined to believe it. His rejected paper was, he felt convinced, a very good paper, and had been flung aside unread, or merely out of ill-nature. This had been his decided opinion at first; and, as he read it through again, he was more convinced than ever that the editor was a person most deficient in taste and judgment. He had no friend, unfortunately, close at hand who might look over the paper with him. Gresley seemed too far away, and Markham was not at all a literary man.

Thus it fell out that one evening he put the unhappy MS. in his pocket and sauntered down to Saltram. There he knew that he should at least get a patient hearing, and, if any, fair criticism, as well as the hearty welcome which always awaited him.

There was a deeper, graver, shadow than

usual on Edith Jervis' pale face, when she rejoined them after dinner; and a dark circle round her eyes, which told of sleepless nights and long hours of anxiety or painful thought. But she brightened up while listening to the rejected *Essay*, and laughingly agreed with him in his strictures about editors in general.

"I know nothing about them, of course," she said, "how should I? But if there is no doubt, as you say, that they always print the worst papers and reject the good ones, what a volume might be made of the rejected essays, poems, and reviews? What a day of triumph for the sons of heaven-born genius and neglected worth! Their very name is legion. They would erect a statue to the editor, and make the publisher's fortune. Why not advertise and invite all disappointed scribes, both of prose and verse, and both genders, to co-operate, elect the most ill-used man editor, and start a New Quarterly?"

"Not being a son of genius," replied Norton, with a hearty laugh, "your plan would be no benefit to me. I am afraid that my goods belong to the dreadful class of mediocrity; what Tom Hood calls 'plain earthenware without a sprig,' whole depths below the fine china-clay."

"In that case," answered his companion, "instead of the 'A. B.' you should have written to the 'C. D. Review,' which, for the last two years, has got duller, heavier, and more solidly improving, quarter after quarter, until it reminds one of Mr. Barlow's talk in 'Sandford and Merton.' The old wit, brilliancy, and keen insight into books and men that once made it so famous, seem to have died out with the famous old Tory editor; and, with the exception of the few final pages of what papa calls 'political fireworks'—a mere string of fiery, bitter personalities,—the whole tone is void of all flavour but that of dictionaries and compendiums of useful knowledge."

“And no wonder,” said Norton, “the present editor is known as the ‘Walking Dictionary,’ and has probably compiled more small, dry, compendiums than any other living man.”

“But why not try *him* with your essay, Mr. Norton? The subject is one just suited for his ‘Review;’ and though I do not like it, he may.”

“*Not like it?*” said Norton, “why, not ten minutes ago, you were full of praise; at least, you said several polite things of the author; which of the two critics am I to believe?”

“Both. I still praise the style and the method; and your reasoning is clever enough, but it does not convince me one grain. Once admit, I allow, that pain is a *necessary* evil, and what you say in its defence is ingenious, as good, perhaps, of its kind as can be said; but that is precisely what I do not and cannot admit. We should get

on, I think, far better without so much pain and misery in this weary world."

"But its existence is suffered for a wise purpose by Him who is goodness itself."

"By whom?"

"God himself, I take it."

"Do you mean that He ordains the existence of evil?"

"Ordains, if you like it better than 'suffers.'"

"I am sorry that neither creed satisfies me at all. He either directly inflicts an infinite amount of suffering and pain on His creatures, or He allows some other power to inflict it on them against His will. The first infringes on my idea of perfect goodness, and the latter on that of omnipotence."

"But pain and suffering," replied Norton earnestly, "are the fruits of man's own doings; the mere result of the violation of certain known laws; discords, as it were, in the harmony."

"To a certain extent," said his companion, "I admit the force of what you say, and so far, it's truth. A man stands in a draught, and gets a toothache, or a cold, a touch of rheumatism, or a twinge of neuralgia—moral, mental, or physical—as the case may be, and has nobody to thank but himself; or again, he is improvident, selfish, miserly, dishonest, mean, false, or vicious in any other direct way you like to select; in any case, sooner or later he often reaps the exact fruit of the seed he has sown. So be it; to this I do not object. The process is natural, and it may be just. But is it just to make him reap a harvest of which he never directly or indirectly sowed one single grain?"

"Looked at in the abstract, as pure justice," said Norton, "it hardly seems fair, I admit. But I question if your definition is quite accurate. Are there such cases as you describe, in which people reap harvests of

misery to which they have made no contribution whatever in the seed-time? Do they reap the whirlwind without sowing the wind?"

"That phrase," replied the lady eagerly, looking keenly at Norton as she spoke, "that phrase of the whirlwind is the very one I want. It exactly describes what I mean. Your lines, Mr. Norton, have perhaps all fallen in pleasant places, and you hardly know yet what agony of spirit, or the sting of pain too great for words, really is! Pain of heart, I mean; anguish of soul, so utterly, entirely unprovoked and undeserved, and yet so intense as to make mere existence a burden."

"I have felt," said Norton, "the touch of sorrow as sharp and deep as death can bring in snatching from me one whom I loved better than my own life; a mother, whose love was so infinitely pure, tender, and true, that it brought me joy, sunshine, and content when all else was dark."

"Terrible, no doubt," she replied, "hard to endure; but still durable. You could have, nay you *must* have, foreseen it. Death must befall *your* dearest one, *your* idol, as it does all othermen's. Your faith as a Christian, too, must have helped both you and her to bear the parting, as well as to look forward to meeting again. But the case I speak of admits of no such mitigation, no consolatory light; no tinge, no semblance of right, of law, or justice—but sheer, absolute, fierce injustice."

These words she uttered with a clear, startling, emphasis, and energy of manner, altogether unusual with her, and so marked as to excite her hearer's keen sympathy, and make him fancy that the young, fair, and usually silent woman must be speaking from her own bitter experience. For a moment there was a silence, but she seemed to read somewhat of his thoughts, and presently went on again in as earnest a voice as before.

" You are shocked, Mr. Norton, to hear such strange sentiments from the lips of a respectable young woman, in her father's house? "

" Not so much shocked," he answered, " for you have as yet said nothing very shocking,—not so much shocked as surprised. I had no idea that my poor *Essay* would have evoked such unpleasant memories as it seems to have done in your mind; far less have led us into an argument, in which—" here he stopped for a moment, but Edith Jervis at once took up the broken thread—

" I must finish your sentence for you, Mr. Norton; you were going to say, in which *you* were on the side of truth, and poor I on that of error. It is better to speak out quite plainly, especially when friends, as distinct from acquaintances, come to a point of difference. You hardly know yet, and will scarcely believe, what a heretic I am. But it is as well that you should know. Such

intolerable anguish and such glaring injustice, as I spoke of just now, seems to be altogether unknown to you ; and, again I say, that in my opinion the world would get on very well without them.”

“ You are arguing,” he said, “ I suppose, from some one extreme case ; from which it is difficult to prove or disprove generalities.”

“ I speak,” she replied, “ of the only one case fully known to myself, but when I look into the faces of many men, and many more women, about me in the world, I am sure that other cases, equally terrible, are to be found in abundance. You must not expect logic,” she added with a smile, “ from a woman, but you shall have facts that ought to speak for themselves. You say that you have known sorrow, bitter, deep sorrow—and that it was for good—have you ever known such sorrow as *this*? A young girl falls in the way of a man, her own equal in rank and position, her superior in intellect ;

witty, handsome, accomplished ; is attracted, fascinated, won ; loses her heart, and marries him. For a month he seems to idolize her ; suddenly grows cool, indifferent, heartless, cold, frozen ; seeks every occasion which devilish malice can suggest to insult, mortify, degrade, and dishonour her ; and accomplishes his task by means too infamous and revolting to be told ; without having it in his power to bring against her a single word of accusation, or charge her with a single fault that could have remotely provoked his villainy. She is plunged headlong into irretrievable suffering by no act or word of her own. Her whole life is clouded ; her heart shamed and broken ; her whole being filled with an intolerable sense of hopeless wrong. Have you ever known what it is to suffer in this sense ? ”

“ I have read of it in books,” replied Nor-ton ; “ in novels—”

“ Read of it in *books* ? ” cried his com-

panion, "then you are talking of you know not what. Until you have felt for yourself anguish such as I have told you of, leave arguing alone. You will reason very differently then ; from the inexorable logic of facts and bitter experience. All I trust is, that you may never know what I have seen, and felt, and endured for long weary, weary, days—days that crawled by like years, and left me the wreck that I am. Forgive me," she added, in a broken voice, and with that look of beseeching entreaty in her soft grey eyes which pierced the young curate's heart, "forgive me for wearying you with my own misery ;" and then pointing to the corner where her father sat dozing in his easy-chair, she added in a whisper, "Here is the General awake, and dying for his cup of tea ; get some music out on the piano, Mr. Norton, and I will try and make amends for all my sad repinings. I can see a sermon of righteous exhortation in your reverence's

face, but you must not preach it to-night. Some other day I may possibly ask for, and be able to bear it." (*Then aloud*), "Mr. Norton, will you have tea or coffee?"

The poor curate felt that he had got the worst of it, that the battle for the time was over ; and all he could say was, " Coffee."

Two days later, as he sat among his books at Danbury, came a brief and hurried note from the General.

" My dear Norton,

" Death has at length put an end to the sufferings of my son-in-law Jervis. The end came suddenly and sadly enough. More when we meet. Come and see us as soon as you can ; for my sake, if not his wife's. The cloud on her seems deeper than ever.

" Sincerely yours,

" R. DARTLAKE."

CHAPTER VIII.

IT CAN NEVER BE.

THE sermon at which Edith Jervis hinted in her final words to Norton was never preached. A mightier preacher suddenly appeared on the scene, and delivered himself of a brief message to which none could turn a deaf ear. But though death was in this case sudden, his coming was not unexpected. For many a long day it had been almost hoped for by the sick man, in his ceaseless longing to be free from pain; while it was a familiar thought to her who still kept watch by the patient's bedside.

He came, too, in the stillness of the night to that lonely chamber among the green, silent, woods, when all the weary world seemed to be at peace, and the stars kept watch along the infinite spaces of heaven.

The husband and wife were alone; but the dying man breathed his last breath without a word, for before any of the household could be summoned, he had sunk into a dull, heavy, sleep that seemed to wrap his very inmost spirit in unbroken calm.

For many a long day she had tried to imagine what the end would be like, and what new emotion the sense of freedom would bring. It was utterly unlike, and remote from, any previous anticipation. As she gazed upon the rigid, marble, face of the man whom she had once loved with all her heart, and who had made life a burden to her, and knelt by his bedside, the shadow as of some invisible presence seemed to fill

the lonely room ; and she burst into a sudden passion of tears, and wild words of entreaty and sorrow, as if appealing to eyes that would never look on her again, to ears that were deaf to all sound for ever. Her heart was bowed within her, and at last in her despair she turned to Him who alone could hear her broken cry of, “Have pity on me, O God.”

When, therefore, in a few days Norton paid to his visit to Saltram, he found her in a much calmer state than the General’s words had led him to expect. The old man himself, strange to say, seemed far more deeply touched than the young widow, and watched for the first opportunity of speaking to his friend alone when she had left the room.

“Two words with you, Norton,” he said, “before she comes back.”

“The worst of it is over now. The inquest was held yesterday, for we were

obliged to have one, not merely because the death was so sudden, but because Jervis being a doctor himself had refused to see any medical man after a first visit. Between you and me I fancy it was a case of morphia; he was always dosing himself, and so at last I suppose took a grain or so too much. Dr. Harris and the coroner were a little fussy about matters at first, and poor Edith was cross-questioned sharply enough, but she bore it bravely, and the necessary certificate was at last signed."

"And was she alone with him at the end?"

"Quite alone; he died about midnight, and it was still early morning when I found her kneeling at his bedside, crying as if her heart would break.

"It was quite by chance that I ventured near, for he would suffer no one to enter his room but her, and as for me, my very presence was like poison to him. Poor

wretch ! he seems to have been without a relation or friend since he came to England. Not a creature has called or inquired for him, or written to him, since the day he came to Saltram."

At this moment Edith Jervis returned to the room, and the General at once changed the subject of conversation.

But the evening passed away slowly and wearily enough. It was an effort to keep up anything like continuous talk, and let the subject be what it might, silence soon crept in, and it was with a sense of relief that the trio parted for the night. Norton felt that his visit was a failure, but the next day's work recalled him to Danbury, and he saw no more of his friends at Saltram for several weeks. Gradually, however, as time went by, things assumed a brighter aspect. The General recovered his spirits in a wondrous fashion, and was quite the hearty, cheerful, host of former days; and

in this change his daughter soon began to share. By degrees the piano was opened again, and long pleasant evenings of music and chat continually attracted and charmed Norton whenever he could get away from his duties at Danbury.

Edith Jervis and he grew more and more intimate than ever, and nothing pleased the old man better than to find them planning some new walk or ride through the neighbouring woods, or across the downs beyond Dorminster Park. Not only was his welcome not exhausted, but his visits were looked forward to by all parties as a regular item in the week's programme. Norton himself was hardly conscious how frequent they had become, nor how much pleasure they yielded; how short and hurried even his home-letters were becoming, and how little his other friends and acquaintances saw of him.

In fact, he was finding a quiet satisfac-

tion and joy in the society of the young widow that he had never before known. And this arose not from mere similarity of tastes and pursuits in the choice of books or in opinions, for in all these respects they continually differed. It was refined, intellectual, intercourse with a woman of singular truthfulness, vigorous thought, and purity ; free from the peril and passionate warmth of love, and yet possessing all the charms of friendship.

The shadow that had so long and sadly haunted her face was still apparent at times ; but it appeared at longer and longer intervals, and often passed quickly away : all which her father observed with infinite satisfaction.

“ Already,” said he one day to his visitor, “ already I owe you a debt I can never repay, and you are now increasing it a hundredfold. You are teaching her to forget the past like a painful dream ; and

to believe that the future is not a weary blank. Only one thing puzzles me, and that is the way in which the dead man seems to have utterly dropped out of her mind. She never mentions his name ; never alludes to him, or seems to be aware that such a person ever existed. Once, and once only, I ventured on some casual remark connected with him, but she shut me up in a trice with,

“Papa, there is but one topic that I cannot talk about even to you ; please never mention it to me again.”

To Norton himself, of course, she had been equally reserved, and again and again had he wondered at her strange silence. But he had wondered in vain. After their memorable talk over his rejected Essay, and the glimpse she had then given him of a life-sorrow that was evidently her own, it seemed but natural that sooner or later she should have recurred in some fashion or

other to the same ground. But what seemed so natural never happened ; and he had far too much delicacy to allude to a topic which his companion, for some reason or other, carefully avoided. All he knew was that the calm, graceful, face always brightened at his appearance, and that in the light of it he found new and unmixed pleasure.

This was the state of things when, one afternoon at the close of a long ramble through Saltram woods, the two found themselves near sunset not far from home, in a quiet valley by the river where it ran shimmering in the soft sunshine over a broad, pebbly, shallow, called Dunter's Ford. It was easily crossed on foot by a little wooden bridge, and on horseback through the sparkling water itself, at this place not more than about a foot in depth. Some cattle were lazily huddled together under an overhanging willow in the cool water, idly flicking

away the flies. Swallows were skimming swiftly to and fro over the shining river ; the wind had died softly away, and touches of rosy cloud floated slowly along the evening sky. All things conspired to incline the travellers to pause awhile, and look down the silver reach of water, as it wound in mazy course across the green meadows.

“ If you are inclined to rest,” said a quiet voice, “ I vote that we get down off this romantic but frail bridge, and sit down under the elms.”

One of the tallest trees had been recently cut down, and lay along upon the grass near the river ; and here they found a pleasant seat in the shade ; she on the trunk itself among the leafy branches, and Norton at her feet on the bank.

“ What a peaceful, happy, valley it seems,” he said, after a few moments’ silence.

“ You are right to say ‘ seems,’ ” she

answered, “but look at the face of that man we saw just now hoeing turnips in the field, the half-starved, sickly, children, or woe-begone, haggard woman, at the cottage-door. Not much content, or peace there. *His* greatest happiness a pot of salt, poisonous, compound called beer, from the ‘Dorminster Arms’; hers, the last scrap of village scandal, a bit of tawdry finery for the Sunday bonnet, or a morsel of skinny meat at harvest-time for her hungry little ones. Vice and poverty and disease stamped upon the whole family. ‘Poverty, hunger, and dirt,’ as your favourite Hood sings, from first to last all the year round; hard, grinding toil, and, by way of variety, foul words and blows from the poor, drunken lout, who is flesh of her flesh, and bone of her bone, her lord and master till death them do part.”

“ You speak bitterly,” replied Norton.
“ The poverty, hunger, dirt, and disease you

tell of, are none of God's ordering, but of man's neglect; ignorance; the rapacity of some selfish, grasping, landlord, who only cares for his weekly rent, and the exact tale of bricks; or the idle improvidence of the father and mother. If men sow the seed, some one must reap the harvest."

"No doubt," was her prompt answer, "but the misery of it is that the some one is so often the wrong person. One man sins, and somebody else pays the penalty."

"But the man who sinned," said Norton, "will also have to suffer. His sin will find him out, later or sooner; lucky for him if it be sooner. He *may* escape now, but there will be no escape then."

"You are referring," she said, "to another world, a future state; I am speaking of this world, the hard realities of this life. In that very cottage on a little bed of rags in the corner of the room, there now lies a little child of six or seven, a hopeless cripple

for life. In one of his fits of drunken fury the father deliberately kicked her down over the steps at the door, and she was picked up half dead, just as I happened to be passing. I fetched the village doctor to see her; and between us, for I watched her night and day for a week, we saved her life. No sooner had she recovered from this, than low fever came on, and there she now lies once more between life and death; a poor, little, wasted skeleton, never free from pain night or day for a single hour, while the great hulking brute who caused all this misery—well you can see his condition, look at him there among the turnips, not a penny the worse, beer and brutality unchanged. These are the things which puzzle me."

" You have set me," replied Norton, " a hard riddle, to which from your point of view I have no answer. But as long as men are free agents and responsible beings, evil having crept into the world, the fruits

of evil must be reaped in some shape or other. If justice is not, or cannot, be done now—”

“ You give me,” she interrupted, “ no answer to my riddle ; for you point to another world. I want matters put somewhat to rights *now* ; you confess you have no answer to give, or none that meets the exact grievance ; can you wonder, then, that my own lot is a puzzle to me, at times a burden hard to bear ? For months past I have been silent, and indeed I never meant to touch on it again, even to an old friend like Mr. Norton. But here I am drifting back to our old battle-field ; a mere, broken, wreck before I reach middle age, with nothing to make life worth living, and except my dear old father, not one human being to care whether I live or die.”

“ Pardon me,” he answered very gently, “ pardon me, Edith Jervis, if I say there is one human being who cares very much

whether you live or die ; to whom your happiness is very dear, who would gladly do all that a man can do to bring back sunshine into your life. Only give him the right to make your happiness his own, and he will wish for no brighter, truer, joy."

More than once she vainly endeavoured to interrupt his hurried, impassioned, words ; but then for a moment gave him no answer. He had risen, as he spoke, and now looked with eager eyes into the pale girlish face over which there came a sudden flush of surprise and pain.

"Harry Norton," she said at last, "I will not pretend to misunderstand your words, loving and true words that to any heart but mine would bring new life ; of which any woman might be proud ; even if spoken only in pity, far more than love. But you have asked that which is impossible. The burden of my life is one that I cannot share ; I must bear it to the end, and alone. My heart is

dead, and the very hand that you now seek you would shrink from ; its very touch would degrade you, stained as it is with blood.”

“ Good God ! ” he exclaimed, dropping her hand as he spoke, “ stained with blood ? What is it you mean ? You speak in riddles now—riddles that amaze me.”

“ No riddle,” she answered, “ no riddle, but a bitter truth, that I have neither courage nor strength to tell you now. Some day you shall know it all ; and judge for yourself. Your wife I can never be ; perhaps, not long your friend. Meanwhile, give me a little day of grace. Let us be friends once more, if but for a time. Forget what you have said ; you spoke on the impulse of the moment ; some day you will meet with a friend worthy of such love, and of such a true heart as yours. Mine they can never be.”

As she uttered these last words, she looked him full in the face, and her eyes told him

beyond all doubt that it was useless for him to speak again. “It can never be” was written there ; and he was wisely silent.

“And, now,” she said, “give me your arm, like a brave, true, friend, and help me up this long hill homewards, or the General will be wondering what has become of us.”

Happily for Norton, the walk back to Saltram was a short one ; for to both it was necessarily painful. He of course made no attempt to renew the conversation which had just ended in so inexplicable a fashion ; and every other topic seemed flat, stale, and unprofitable. The charm was gone from the rosy western sky ; the peace of the valley had vanished ; and a shadow rested where but now all was bright.

The dinner that night seemed interminable ; and though Edith did her best to amuse her father, he rallied both the young people on being such “horribly bad company,” and was

glad enough at its conclusion to betake himself to a cigar in the library, where, to his still greater surprise, Norton declined to join him.

"I must go back to Danbury to-night," he said to Edith when they were alone, "and you must invent an excuse for me to the General. The riddle you have given me to solve seems more mysterious than ever, and I must think over it alone and in quiet."

She made no reply, but they shook hands and parted.

"Stay," she added, "stay,—*friends*?"

"Yes, friends, certainly.

"Always?"

"Always."

Then he went his way.

CHAPTER IX.

NOT SO BAD AS HE SEEKS.

"A very tainted and perverted fellow."

All's Well that Ends Well.

AFTER parting with Edith Jervis, Norton went on his way, but certainly not, after the fashion of Bunyan's pilgrim, rejoicing. There was much in his interview with her not merely to puzzle but to distress him; and anxious thought followed him, not only on his way home, but for many a long hour afterwards. And, luckily perhaps for him, though the solution of the puzzle as to her

refusal was not far off, before it arrived an incident occurred which entirely distracted his thoughts from Saltram, and suddenly threw them into a different channel. Of this sudden diversion—even at the expense of the reader's patience—notice must be taken in a brief chapter.

Some little while before, when life and work were really progressing at Saltram, and Norton had begun to understand and like his position, Mr. Markham, of the foundry, took it into his head to found a small dispensary close to the iron-works, where the wives and children of his workmen might, by payment of a small sum, obtain medical advice and treatment.

"I do not want," he had said to Norton, "to encourage them in dosing themselves or their children; for the less physic that any human being swallows, the better must it be for him. But I wish to save them from the tender mercies of a quack doctor—

a fellow named Harris, I think—who has opened a shop just opposite the foundry gates, and professes to cure every ailment under the sun with some nostrum or other.”

In due time the plan for the dispensary was settled ; and all that was wanted was some active, shrewd, young medico as managing man. The difficulty was to find such a man, well-qualified and yet content, for such small remuneration as they could afford, to undertake the office of dispenser.

“ You know the parish well, Norton,” said Markham, “ and the sort of man we want ; and just now, even if competent, I am too busy to see candidates. Will you do us all a great kindness, and allow all applications, etc., to be made to the Curate of Danbury ? ”

To this Norton had readily agreed ; but although an advertisement had been again

and again inserted in the local papers, so small was the remuneration offered that as yet not a single candidate had appeared. A month or two had passed away, and the curate had almost forgotten the whole affair, when, on the day following his interview with Edith Jervis, as he sat smoking his morning pipe with Barclay, Joe Simmons suddenly appeared at the hall-door, to say that a person named Dr. Harris wished to see him on particular business.

“ Harris !” said Norton ; “ I do not know the name at all. What does he want ? ”

“ He won’t say, sir, further than he wants to see you very particular. He don’t know you, and you don’t know him.”

“ A gentleman, Simmons ? ”

“ Not very much like one, sir ; something in the ‘ photo ’ line, or on the tramp, I should say, sir. His whole toggery, from

his hat to his boots, ain't worth half-a-crown. But he isn't a beggar."

"Very well, Simmons; take him into the study, and say I will be there directly. Meanwhile, keep an eye on the great coats."

"All right, sir."

When Norton entered the study, he saw that his visitor—a tall man, in very seedy garments, with a long black beard—had calmly settled himself down into an easy-chair, with his back to the door, and was apparently cleaning his nails with a penknife.

But at the sound of the opening door he rose quickly from his seat; and then, to his utter amazement, Norton suddenly found himself face to face with his old enemy, Fred Needer.

There was no mistaking the man, and Norton knew him in a moment; though long years of 'poverty, hunger, and dirt' had

made many changes in the fellow's outward appearance.

For a moment the two men looked at each other in blank silence, which Needer was the first to break. This he did in as jaunty, voluble, unabashed a voice as he could muster, though not unmixed with many signs of doubt as to what his reception was to be.

"You seem surprised, Mr. Norton, to see me here."

"Surprised and sorry," replied Norton. "You are about the last person I should have cared to see again anywhere, and least of all here."

"I am as surprised as you are, and perhaps care as little for the meeting. But here I am, strange to say, and we must now make the best of it."

"So it seems," replied Norton. "But if you neither wished nor cared to see me, why on earth did you come? and why under a false name?"

“ If I had known that the Curate of Danbury was Mr. Norton, your door would never have been darkened by me. I saw your advertisement about the dispensary, which mentioned no name, and came to apply for the vacant place. My name is Harris in Dorminster ; and for the last month or two I have kept a shop there, and tried to drive the wolf from the door by doctoring the poor people at the foundry when I got a chance. I was obliged to change my name into Harris, because Needer was pretty well worn out since you and I parted ; and the last place I was in had got too hot to hold me. I was over head and ears in debt when I left Sawbridge, and was glad to get ten shillings a week as assistant in a druggist’s shop in Dorminster. But a wife and seven children can’t live on ten shillings a week. We pawned everything that could be pawned, except my hat and boots ; and then there was nothing for

it but to turn quack doctor in the market-place, and cure everybody with a universal pill and Harris's American balsam. For the first time in my life I began to prosper, and we actually had meat twice a week, when out comes a scheme for a new dispensary, and away go three-fourths of my patients at once. In a week we shall be starving again, the whole nine of us; and so, as a last chance, I determined to apply for the dispensary business myself. But I had no more notion who the Curate of Danbury was than you had of Dr. Harris, or you would not have caught me here. There," he added, "now, Mr. Norton, you know the whole story, and I must go, of course. You need not tell your man to look after the umbrellas, as he did just now; I have not quite come down to *that* yet, though it may not be far off. I know my way out."

"Stop, man!" said Norton; "stop. If you have told me the truth—"

“The truth!” replied Nelder; “what can I gain by a lie? My shop is just opposite the foundry gates, and my name over the door. Look at my coat and hat if you still doubt me. What would they fetch at a pawn-shop? I have been a fool and something worse, I dare say, in my time, Norton; but, upon my soul, for these three years past I have worked like a horse to keep body and soul together, and to find bread for my children. I have worked hard; and now there is nothing for it but the workhouse.”

And at this, for very shame and grief, the poor wretch turned his head away as the tears trickled down over his face, in spite of all he could do to check them.

“Sit down,” said Norton, after a moment’s pause; “sit down. I don’t see how I can help you. They will not appoint any but a qualified man, and of

good character. I know nothing of you but what you have just told me."

"But I am qualified ; I did actually pass the College of Surgeons, though I see that you stare when I say so. I *did* pass, and can show you my diploma ; but you must not ask for any references. The only man I ever worked for—away beyond Sawbridge —won't say a word for me, I know. He—well, we had a row ; and, whichever was the worst of the two, I made a mess of it. But, for God's sake, Norton, give me one more chance if you can. You gave me a good licking once, which I richly deserved, no doubt ; and what becomes of *me* now is no great matter. But I have a wife, for whom I do care a little, and who will bless you for ever if you give us this one lift."

It must have been a harder heart than Norton's that could stand such an appeal as this ; and though he had but a few minutes

before resolved to do nothing for his old foe, his resolution now melted into thin air.

In ten minutes from that time Dr. Harris was dining heartily on cold beef in the hall, and “My life!”—as Joe Simmons afterwards remarked—“he *did* eat uncommon hearty, to be sure.”

“There,” said Norton, as they parted at the Danbury gate, “there is a letter to Mr. Markham that will, I think, make it all right with him if he presses for testimonials. At all events, I have said all that I honestly could for you—perhaps more. Stick to your work now, Needer, like a man, if you *do* care for your wife and children, and do not shame my recommendation.”

“I’ll be d—d if I do!” replied Needer, in his loudest, jauntiest, style and voice, for a good meal of beef and beer had quite restored him to his usual spirits; “I’ll be

d--d if I do, Mr. Norton. And so a thousand thanks for a capital lunch and this note. Good morning. *Au revoir.*"

And raising his hat—old, battered, and greasy as it was—away went Dr. Harris; and as he disappears out of Danbury gates, he also drops out of our story.

Norton never saw him again; but he duly obtained the post of dispenser, and faithfully discharged its duties almost up to the time of the curate's own death.

"Joe," said Norton, when he reached the house, "if that man ever calls here again, and is really hard up, give him a shilling and a loaf of bread; but don't let him come inside the gates."

The caution was needless; for Needer stuck to his work in Dorminster, actually made a few friends, and at last found other patients among the poor beyond the dispensary.

No sooner had they parted than Norton's thoughts soon reverted to their old channel; and he began once more to speculate eagerly on the events of the previous day, and the causes which had led to his rejection.

CHAPTER X.

WHY IT COULD NEVER BE.

BEFORE the reader condemns Harry Norton for being inconstant, or for rushing headlong into the verb *Amo*, as his friend Gresley termed the process, two points must be fairly urged on his behalf. In the first place, his acquaintance with Edith Jervis had slowly ripened into deep intimacy, almost before he was aware of its depth and truth. Such a friendship, enhanced as it was by a vein of tender pity, softly and imperceptibly grew perilously near to love, of which he had no suspicion. Secondly,

her sudden and renewed confidence concerning herself, and her own life-long sorrow, had taken him completely unawares. It was impossible to hear of such misery as hers, and not try to relieve it. And to relieve it there was but one way.

This was all that the Curate of Danbury ventured to plead on his own behalf, to himself; and in substance all that he resolved to impart to his old friend Gresley, if the subject ever came up between them. But as it happened, it never did come up again either in letters to Gresley or to Dormouth; and only a brief record in his journal records the bare facts, which he felt had been revealed to him for no ear but his own.

Many a time did he ponder on the strange and terrible words "Stained with blood;" but the more he pondered the greater seemed the mystery. Whatever they meant, however, there could be no doubt.

that his intimacy at Saltram could never again be what it had been. He might visit there as an acquaintance, but as an acquaintance only. A game of bowls with the General, or of chess with his daughter, with perhaps, now and then, a dash of quiet music; but that would be all. No more evening rambles through the woods, no more readings aloud, no more discussions as to any rights and wrongs under the sun, however tempting; no more little half-confidential whisperings, for fear of waking the old gentleman in his cosy chair, no more happy differences of opinion, or still happier agreement, or laughing compromise.

It was a dead loss; but after a time he made up his mind to it as inevitable, and then turned more resolutely to his books than ever; acting on his friend's advice about work, and determined to find in pens and ink the surest and quickest relief from

thoughts which idleness only helped to foster.

Among some new volumes from the library at Dorminster, Norton found one specially sent on to him (with a note) by his old ally at the foundry. "It's a strange affair," wrote Markham, "and altogether beyond me to prove or disprove. But as well as I can make it out, we are all no better than so many gorillas; and, according to the last 'new light,' had as much to do with sponges, before the flood, as we had to do with Adam and Eve. For my part, I prefer Moses and the Book of Genesis; but you will know how to deal with this new-fangled philosophy, and tell us poor quiet country-folk what to believe. I shall be glad to have your opinion. Are you never coming our way again?"

In answer to his friend's half-joking inquiry, he resolved once more to try his pen at an essay for one of the magazines,

and after some days he had in fact nearly completed it, when he received the following letter, which for a time turned his thoughts into a widely different channel.

“*Saltram.*

“ My dear Mr. Norton,

“ What I had not the courage to tell you face to face, I have at last resolved to commit briefly to paper, not so much in justice to myself as in proof that to you I have spoken and acted as I have done not without cause. To tell you the whole miserable story in detail would weary my pen and exhaust your patience. I can, therefore, but indicate its main features. It is enough to say that I was eighteen when I married, and went away on my wedding-trip to the hills with a man whom I loved and thought worthy of my love. The month was a happy one, and it passed away swiftly as a dream. Then my hus-

band was appointed to another regiment, at another station far away from my own people, and I was among strangers. The year that followed grew gradually less and less happy, and the plain reason had better be given at once. The man for whom I had forsaken all, insisted on having some native servants in the house whom I especially disliked, and among them a young girl whom he owned he had previously known at some other station; a bold, handsome, cunning beauty, whom he hired as my attendant, with whom he openly flirted, and who openly encouraged his addresses. My private entreaties and remonstrances, my passionate appeals, he treated as he did my public anger, with ridicule, and at last with contempt. He threatened that if I did not make friends with her, and with another elder servant, also his favourite, it would be the worse for me. God help me! his threat was soon fulfilled. Then came-

the birth of my baby, and for a few days I had one secret source of joy and comfort of which he could not deprive me. But my boy died when a week old, and he declared with an oath that the death was caused by my infernal temper. How I lived through the month that followed I know not ; but when at last I had strength to crawl downstairs again, I found the two women installed in my place. ‘They were his mistresses,’ he said, ‘and I was only his wife.’ They had their children openly in the house. My baby was dead.

“ You say at once, of course, Why did I not appeal to my father, demand a divorce, and leave the wretch to his fate ?

“ For many reasons, of which two will be enough. Because I knew that my father would have died at the shame and dis-honour brought on a spotless name ; or dragged out an old age of hopeless grief and misery for his child’s sake, and because

I could not endure to have all my intolerable wrongs blazoned to the world in a court of law ; my pride would not permit me to be pointed out or talked of in every station, and at every mess-table in India, as the victim of a degrading outrage. I therefore held my tongue, and resolved to bear in silence what I could not escape by any other means. And dearly, too, I paid for my silence. He was a coward as well as a scoundrel ; and when he found that I shrank from exposing him, he stretched his malice to the very utmost in inventing fresh insults, and loading me with more and more shameful indignities. But my mind was made up, and I endured all that even his devilish ingenuity could devise.

“ At last, there came a lull. A sunstroke befell him, then fever and other ailments, the fruits of his own riot and debauchery ; and he was sent home invalided, a helpless wreck, shattered both in mind and body.

I insisted that he should be brought to my father's house, and, as you know, through all the weary, bitter days that followed, I was his only nurse. His sufferings, no doubt, were terrible and incessant. But what were they when compared with the hapless woman's who bore his name? As a drop of water to the ocean; his were bodily; mine of heart, soul, and spirit.

"I only was with him, when the end came. It was midnight, and he had been racked with pain for many hours, when, as usual, at such times of agony, I handed to him the bottle of morphia, his only source of relief.

"With eager, trembling hands he poured it into a glass; I watched every movement, and saw the glass slowly filled to the brim, treble his usual dose. As I watched him, I knew that after such a dose he could never wake again. At the very instant I was

about to dash the glass from his hands, but for one moment I hesitated, and in another it was too late. He had swallowed the whole contents of the glass, and at once slowly sank into a deep slumber. I made no attempt to rouse him, for, as the tempter whispered to me, and as indeed was true, it was useless. He never moved or spoke again. They found him dead as the morning dawned, and me weeping, as I had never before wept, at his feet.

“Now, Harry Norton, you know why I spoke of blood on the hand which you claimed to make yours.

“Whether my crime in the sight of Heaven be actual murder, when or how it will be, or can be, atoned for, in this world or in the next, I leave you to judge, as a priest and servant of Christ. I need not ask you to hold my confession as sacred. No punishment that may follow my *sin* can exceed the torture that preceded it. I

neither deprecate the one nor palliate the other. But it was right that you should know the whole truth.

“E. J.”

That the contents of this letter amazed and shocked Norton may be well imagined. He read and re-read the terrible words ; but always with the same result, amazement at the terrible secret that had now been committed to his trust, horror at the sin, and yet deep pity for the guilty woman. The confession itself was full and frank ; she had clearly made the most of her crime, concealed nothing, and attempted no extenuation. But if there were no excuses, there was little sign of repentance, or of deep sorrow. She looked upon the deed simply as *done* ; and the burden of it, however bitter, to be borne by herself alone.

What reply, then, was he to make ?

How was he to treat this guilty woman, who had opened to him her whole heart, and confessed a great and fearful sin? Young, confiding, innocent, and loving, she had been foully wronged, insulted, and betrayed by a heartless libertine, who was himself now beyond the reach of all human judgment and human punishment. His sin, whether rightly or wrongly, had surely found him out so far as this world was concerned; and as to the future, *that* question of all questions was in the hands of a judge omniscient and supreme. Whatever the verdict, it was not for man to weigh or to touch.

Was it then for Norton to step in in the other case as an arbiter, or a judge, to condemn or to acquit? To come between the guilty and Him against whom she had sinned, and presume to hold the scales of innocence and guilt, or decide the issue of life or death?

Clearly not. The question must be left in the hands of Him, who knew all ; and, knowing all, would decide with infinite justice as well as mercy.

For many a weary hour did thoughts of this troubled kind press on the Curate as he sat in his lonely room at Danbury.

There was some truth in the conclusion at which he arrived ; but there was also a fallacy which, in his perplexity, was overlooked. Patent enough, no doubt, to the keen, impartial, reader ; but far less clear to a man called suddenly to judge one who had been an intimate friend, whom he had persuaded himself that he loved, and who was still bound to him by many ties. No wonder, therefore, that his final judgment was not so complete or so unassailable as it might or ought to have been ; and no wonder that he wrote and burned many letters before he could accomplish one that at all satisfied him. But, at last, he wrote as follows :

“ My dear friend,

“ For ‘ friend ’ you must ever be, that your letter of last night amazed and shocked me beyond all expression you may well imagine. Even now, after long hours of anxious thought, I know not what answer to make to it, that befits the case, or may be of any help to you. But this much is clear, the more plainly the more briefly I speak, the better. If details are touched, a dozen questions must arise for discussion, that still leave the main issue unsettled. Enough, then, to say that I have read and weighed all the terrible facts as fairly as I can.

“ You have confessed to me the whole of a terrible secret in your life, which I now regard as having passed entirely out of my hands into His who is the one judge of all. With Him it remains to decide the magnitude of every crime, as well as the innocence or guilt of the accused ; the truth of repentance ; the reality of remorse ; the possibility

of atonement. But all these are questions which I dare not entertain, much less attempt to answer.

“That *He* can and will answer them, and all others that you really bring to Him, I am as firmly convinced as that I now live and breathe. That your sin will find *you* out, in the right time and the right way, as *his* sin has found out the wretched being who has gone to his account, it is impossible to doubt ; but I must decline to estimate its gravity, or to date its issue. There is but one place where pardon can be had ; there is but One who can forgive. May God bring you soon to the peace that follows absolute forgiveness.

“The priest and servant of Christ can at least pray for this.

“Always your old friend,

“H. NORTON.”

The letter which cost so much weary

thought, time, and trouble, did not after all satisfy him. But he sent it ; and was thankful to get the subject thus far off his mind.

The loss of his visits to Saltram was a real one, and many an hour now fell idly on his hands which, in Dorminster would have been crowded with parish work. As Curate of Danbury, the greater part of every day was in truth absolute leisure. He rarely had a single case on the sick list, and the short services of Wednesday and Friday, with the fuller ones of Sunday, left him an abundance of time for exercise or amusement. The consequence of this was that time just then began to hang heavily on his hands, and he gladly turned again to the new volume of which Markham had asked his opinion ; hunted up his forgotten essay, and set to work to finish it.

It took some days to complete, and then was sent off to his old mentor Gresley, for approval, revision, and correction. Two or

three pleasant letters were interchanged ; and the result was that the so-called essay came back to Danbury considerably altered and curtailed, having assumed the shape of an ‘Epistle to a friend.’

“ I have,” said Gresley, “ cut out as many of the choice passages as I dared ; and laid hands especially on the exuberantly funny places ; for, although Hoskins’ ‘ Man or Monkey ’ is an arrogant book, and here and there apt to be superficial, and given to guessing and supposing, the man is still a man of science, and has gathered together an infinite number of facts. You have no business therefore to answer his facts, or his science, by mere jocosity. At times, however, your fun really tells ; and there, as you see, I have given you full swing.

“ Don’t be angry, my dear Curate, at the liberty I take with my old friend ; I have cut and carved your essay as if it were my very own bantling. Besides, you can, if you

like, restore all the tid-bits to their old places; and send off your epistle to ‘Docker’s Weekly Magazine’ in all its original glory.

“N.B. You have been waxing fat of late, it strikes me, from having nothing to do. Don’t kick over the traces, entirely.”

But Norton was far too wise not to avail himself of his friend’s wider experience of editors, and of accepted papers; and to his own great satisfaction, in the next number of ‘Docker,’ he saw in actual print an article entitled “Our Cousins in the Zoo.”

Of its merit, the reader may, if he pleases, judge for himself in the next chapter.

CHAPTER XI.

“OUR COUSINS IN THE ZOO.”

*In a Letter to Joseph Wagsley, Esq., of Little
Pedlington.*

“My dear Joseph,

“I was glad to see your handwriting again, but grieved to hear that the terrible tidings of our new cousinship had already invaded the peaceful domains of Little Pedlington. I fancied you were there as safe against a fire-brand from Mudie’s as against a joint stock bank in High Street, or a steam plough on the squire’s lawn.

“‘Good Heavens!’ you say, ‘have you

seen Hoskins' awful book, and learned that Genesis I, II, and III, at least are myths, and Moses no better than he should be? What is the world coming to ?'

"With regard to that final question about the world, I must refer you to the learned divine of Crown Court, who of all living men seems to be most intimately acquainted with the chronology of the universe, past, present, and to come ; and in his next prophecy of the Millennium may perhaps be even more successful than he was in the last.

"But, touching Moses, my dear Joseph, I am bound to say NOT PROVEN, and not anything like PROVEN. Don't be terrified ; the case is not hopeless as yet. The world is a wide place, and in it are many men of many minds, too many to be counted,—some too wise to be ignorant of their own wisdom ; of understanding too keen and deep to feel any need of revelation ; of intellect too supreme not at a single glance to be able to survey

time, eternity, the universe, things seen and unseen, of the flesh and of the spirit ; and of knowledge too transcendent not to ignore such words as ‘bar’ or ‘limit,’ ‘finite and infinite,’ ‘human and divine.’ One of these perfect omniscient beings has written a book to show to the nineteenth century what took place in the cosmogony of the world some ten, twenty, or fifty, thousand, or million years ago.

“Very well, my dear Joseph, what then ? “*Vixere fortis ante Agamemnona*” ; there were brave men before the son of Atreus ; learned doctors before Aquinas, who propounded the problem of how many angels could dance on the point of a needle. Many a long-ears brayed before the days of Balaam, as has since happened ; many doubters asked questions, and propounded queries, long before a South African bishop, puzzled by the intelligent Zulu, turned the books of Moses into a set of arithmetical problems,

but *more suo* omitted the answers. There were geologists, biologists, and gnostics, long before the days of Hoskins ; and scoffers years, say a million, before nails were driven into the Ark. The art of sneering flourished, no doubt, long before letters ; and infidels whole ages before men knew the difference between *meum* and *tuum*. These last have been the master spirits of their day. Every age has its chief elect, stars that shine for their own great glory, and the safety of mankind in general. Why should our age have less ?

“ As for ‘ Moses,’ so often and so utterly has he been upset, that the only wonder is to find him yet on his feet ; so often annihilated that his very existence would be a ‘ miracle ’ were such a word anything but a remnant of bygone superstition—obsolete, exploded, defunct. Let us look ‘ Hoskins,’ then, full in the face, and see whether our own well-known, old-fashioned account of

things according to Genesis, having stood the test of—well, say four thousand years—will stand this latest shaft from the enemy.

"Did you ever read, Joseph, the old Indian fable of the manner in which this great world of ours is held up ; of course, for the sun to go round ? Nothing can be easier, nothing simpler. It is altogether and entirely a matter of faith. This little globe, then, rests on the back of a mighty elephant, and the mighty elephant stands on the back of a tortoise, a creature whose shell is specially adapted to undergo any amount of pressure. And the tortoise, on what does he rest ? Ah ! my dear Joseph, you must not ask impertinent questions ! The globe, the elephant, the tortoise, *voilà tout* ; you must be content, and leave the rest to the pundits. Faith, Joseph, faith. Listen to the latest gospel according to Hoskins, built up on the very same ingenious foundation as the tortoise and the elephant.

“There can, then, be no doubt that there is good reason to believe, ‘it seems to be *almost* certain,’ ‘it is incredible that all these facts should be so, unless our remotest forefathers and foremothers (for it seems we had both)—always barring Adam and Eve—belonged to one of two great groups of monkeys, the Catarhine and Platyrrhine families: probably owing most to the former, from which we receive our dental system and nostrils. From this dainty *kindred*—*omitting* the missing link between the wild denizen of the forest (with filthy habits and unintelligible cries) and the first rational human being—we have all sprung. By slow degrees, and dint of intermingling, transfusion, and improvement of race, sprang our more immediate forefathers, rough—hairy quadrupeds, who lived in trees, who ate acorns and pig-nuts, who grinned and gibbered at each other, and scratched their filthy backs and shoulders, and cocked their

pointed ears, and brandished and twisted their long tails, and fought savagely for the youngest and fairest females of the tribe, and carried with them a fragrance not exactly identical with '*eau de Cologne*.'

"These, Joseph, were our noble ancestors !

"Brutes, knowing but the two appetites lust and hunger ; conscious only of being full or empty ; of heat and cold ; and alive only to the arguments of brutal force, rage, and rapacity. And for *their* predecessors we must go even further back, to the dim obscurity of ages remote by untold millions of years, to creatures still lower and baser, who basked in the slimy ouse, or glided through muddy water, revelling in filth among the foulest of created things ; with both sexes combined in a single being, possibly resembling the larvae of marine *Ascidians*.

"Such is the fountain-head of man's being ; the source whence sprang Socrates,

Shakespeare. Bacon, Homer, Dante, Michael Angelo ! in a word, all the mighty intellects that have ever adorned the world, and crowned it with the richest fruits of imagination, reason, wit, fancy, judgment and skill ; with heroic endurance, with living charity, with burning faith, and passionate devotion ; with patriotism, reverence, piety, humility, honour, purity, righteousness, justice, and eternal truth !

“ Well may the poet exclaim,—

“ Sed genus et proavos et quæ non fecimus ipsi
Fur es nostra vocis.”

“ Such ancestors ours ? Who would have them at any price ? far better be an oak of the forest, root of mangold-wurzel, or an honest turnip.

“ ‘ It takes a deal of faith,’ you say, ‘ to believe this ? ’

“ Yes, Joseph, it does take a good deal ; but still you must have it—you must trust in Hoskins, the *ipse dixit* of one man. Re-

member the elephant and the tortoise, and be wise in time.

"But, joking apart, in the name of heaven and common sense, why should you believe in any such mountain of unqualified assumption ?

"On some such ground as *this*. Because monkeys, baboons, gorillas, and other such gentry have, from time immemorial, and millions of years before that, in all regions of the earth, fought for and obtained the best and fairest females by dint of a strong arm ; the strongest and handsomest arboreal has always got the pick of the tribe for his harem ; the young roving blade with the bluest patch of smooth skin on his back—a patch denuded of hair for the express purpose of attracting the gentler sex ; or who had the most or least amount of hair on his face (for the fashion it seems wavered), has ever won for himself the most charming of brides, with the longest ears, and most capa-

cious of paunches. Thus the strongest, fairest, and mightiest carried on the race. And as they fought for wives, so fought they also for the snuggest trees, and choicest locations,—for the richest pig-nuts or acorns, scrap of garbage, or morsel of cocoa-nut. So hand-in-hand, for countless ages went on the two great works of '*Progress by Natural Selection*' for both sexes and all time; and by *sexual selection* for creatures of the same sex fighting for wives, or grinning and screaming for husbands.

“This is the tortoise on which the elephant rests !

“Only have faith and you reach at once the happy origin of the human race in all its countless varieties of form and colour. Out of the charming woodland family who grinned and fought, and scratched and howled, slowly, step by step, in the course of ages, emerged a being who did *not* live in a tree, or crawl, or grin, but stood up-

right, and uttered intelligible words, and looked up to heaven, and *knew that he did so* ; who suddenly became gifted with a living conscience, and a power to think, and felt within him the breath of an immortal spirit.

"Do you ask WHY you are to believe this?

"Simply because as monkeys, baboons, and gorillas fought for wives or rations, wore beards or tore out their hair, scraped bare patches of skin, screamed and bit in jealous fury, or grinned in amorous delight, just in that very same fashion has it been with man and woman from the remotest ages to this day. As did our forefathers, so have we done : the border ruffian ; the whiskered, scented, dandy ; the armed soldier ; the court bully ; the male flirt ; the artful, patched and powdered coquette,—are all only antitypes of the past. And, as among the race of refined and interesting gorillas, so among the sons of men went on the two

works of Natural and Sexual Selection. The only little hitch in this simple arrangement being to fix the exact point *when* and *where* the gentle gorilla began to improve, suddenly burst his shell, and emerged as a Reasonable Human being !

“ If you want more reasons still, know that so it must be, ‘ Because *Birds* also, both male and female, have been seen to coquet and flirt, to pay court to gay feathers and bare spots, to fight madly in wanton jealousy, and to indulge in a thousand little arts and graces at times of breeding and nursing, just as it happens in Mayfair or in Seven Dials ; —because one huge ourang outang has been known to cover himself with leaves at night, and another equally scientific baboon to hide his ugly carcase by day under the bough of a tree to escape the sun ; ’ or, lastly, ‘ because the *os coccyx* at the end of the human vertebræ is the rudiment of what was a tail in his progenitors ! ’ Q. E. D.

"Nothing, you see, can be fairer, clearer, or more cogent than such reasoning ; nothing more logical. By such logic may be proved any proposition under the sun, however fantastic, infamous, or amazing ; though a good deal depends on the way of handling your tools. For example, if you come to an awkward, dangerous place, where the ground quakes under your feet, leave it point-blank at once ! Go back, or on, a thousand years or so ; or a million if needed. 'Just here,' you can remark, 'occurs an unfortunate gap, which future scientific explorers will have to bridge ; there is a link missing ; an interval ; an hiatus *valde deflendus*, but of no real importance to the theory.'

"Only have faith ! Fill up the gaps or leave them open, supply the links or eliminate them, just as required ; only have faith ! The globe is safe on the elephant's back, the elephant on the tortoise ; and that curious little creature, as we have seen,—

‘Self-poised in air, serenely strong, aloft
Its mighty burden bears—from age to age—
Amid the rushing orbs.’

“ Such, Joseph, is the book that has fallen like a thunder-bolt on your peaceful hamlet. But don’t be terrified. Many such bolts have fallen before now, and the world still rolls calmly on. Moses still survives. Millions believe in him rather than in Hoskins; still feeling in them ‘*the breath of life*’ that made man immortal; knowing that they are *not* as the beasts that die; convinced that in spite of all man’s follies, sins, mistakes, and ignorance, there is yet within him a part that must outlive all base things, and cannot perish. Nothing can stay this belief; nothing can root it out of man’s heart. It is his heritage; in him and of him; his inmost being—himself.

“ Meanwhile, let the speculators and sophists of the day write on, and send forth into the busy world their latest, fondest,

wisest rhapsodies as to the past ages of the world. All in good time will even wiser, keener, volumes appear, and wrap their names in the same oblivion which swallowed up their forefathers.

'They have their day and cease to be.'

Let them have their day, and say their say. The grand, old, faith which has taught men to live and to die all these thousands of years is not to be snuffed out by a blast from Paternoster Row, however keen or however subtle. Blood is after all thicker than water; let those own their new Cousin at 'The Zoo' who like the connection. Little Pedlington may sleep in peace.

"Meanwhile, if any expounder of the new faith, red-hot from the Row, should wander into your neighbourhood, and put all the dove-cots in a flutter, just ask him to answer the following simple queries.

"1. If the present race of man sprang

from these long-tailed, long-eared, progenitors of the woods, whence come the broad varieties of colour and form—Brown, Red, Black, White—Malay, Negro, and European?

“2. If out of a foul, grinning Ape, there once grew a living, speaking Man, endued with a Conscience and a Soul, where and when did the amazing process stop? The transmutation must have been either instant and sudden, or gradual, step by step. If sudden and instant, why has the miracle ceased? The same Natural Laws are ever unceasingly at work, why do they now produce no fruit?

“If the process be by slow gradation, why, among the millions of living Apes, Monkeys, and Baboons, is to be found no one specimen of the wondrous transformation *actually going on*? Why did the process ever stop?

“3. If the mental powers of animals are

the same in kind with man, they must be capable of advancement. Yet from the Flood to this day no signs of advancement are visible. Even the Elephant, the Bee, and the Beaver are only and precisely what they have ever been. *How is this?*

“ 4. If an amazing act of Natural Education once converted Gorillas into such beings as Shakespeare, Plato, and Pindar, where now shall be found one, only one, half-breed, neither all monkey nor all man ; hirsute and yet heroic; bestial and yet refined; a mixture of ferocity and gentleness; of blind ignorance and wisdom ; of purity and of infinite filthiness ?

“ One such creature would be worth countless millions of dollars, and Barnum would rise from the grave to meet him. A Scientific Exhibition would rush from Piccadilly to secure him at all hazards, at any cost.

“ One such specimen would be more po-

tential than a hundred Hoskinses; more logical than a thousand octavos; and a chimpanzee that could pass through the College of Preceptors, or satisfy Cole, C.B., with the very smallest known honour, or survive a competitive examination for the Indian Forest Service, more convincing than whole armies of Colenso.

“Sleep, therefore, in peace, my good old friend. Genesis i, ii, and iii are quite safe as yet. The world is not coming to an end. The monkey-house in ‘The Zoo’ has not yet ordered a dozen copies of ‘Hoskins’ for family reading. Sleep, therefore, I say in peace. Ponder, reflect, compare; which is many a league beyond what the wisest gorilla ever yet did, or ever will do.

“‘Man,’ says Hoskins, ‘reflects, compares, and feels disappointment—*this is his conscience*—just as Ponto the pointer feels when he thinks (?) of a partridge hunted instead of pointed at.’ Not quite the same

thing, most excellent Hoskins; for, in the first place, it is not quite proven as yet that Ponto ever does think of partridges *hunted* as distinct from partridges *pointed at*; and, in the second, Ponto, under the keen eye of Colonel Hawker, does only just what his forefather did under the ken of Nimrod, that mighty hunter a thousand years or so before the pyramids; and that only will future Pontos do when the pyramids are dust. Whereas, no two out of all the countless generations of men ever yet reflected or compared in one exact fashion, and between Nimrod and the colonel stretches a mighty gulf of difference, that widens as the ages roll by.

"Go, therefore, my dear Joseph, when next in town, straight to the 'THE Zoo,' and give that interesting quadruped behind the bars a penny bun at the end of your walking-stick, without the faintest compunction. Charity does begin at home, but you will

not be bestowing *largesse* on a ‘Poor Relation.’

“Ever yours,

“SIGMA.”

A copy of the magazine was, of course, duly despatched by Norton to Dormouth Court, to his father, and to Tom Gresley, and to Saltram; and from each of these, except the last, he received just that goodly sort of soft insinuating praise which, to a young author, is as pleasant and as necessary as oil to dry wheels. But from his old friend at Saltram came not a word of reply—a silence that puzzled him for a time, but was soon forgotten in events of greater moment which came about, as many a great event in a man’s life does come, by what seemed a mere trifle.

It was a month or two after this that Norton had one day turned to a drawer full of old papers in his secretary, in search

of Edith Jervis's letter, when his thoughts were all at once diverted into another channel by coming suddenly upon an invitation to dinner at Dormouth Court, dated three days back. "Come early," wrote Markham, "as there are to be charades for the children after dinner, and your advice is wanted in all quarters touching scenery and dress. Besides, as my wife begs me to say, Mr. Norton is such a favourite with the young people that he will be of real service, as some thirty or forty children are coming to the dance that is to wind up the evening."

It was too late to answer the letter by post, as the invitation was for that very night, and the only plan would be to take a fly to Dormouth, and make his excuses in person. There was barely time to manage this; but, by dint of quick dressing and hard driving, Norton got to Dormouth Court just as the second dinner bell was ringing.

A hearty welcome as usual awaited him;

his excuses were accepted almost before made ; and the dinner, an exuberant one, full of noisy juvenile talk about the charades and the raptures of the dance that was to follow them, was hurried over at a great pace that the room might be cleared and got ready in good time for an early supper. Then there were dresses to be discussed, and scenes to be arranged, and partners to be talked of, and the order of dances to be settled ; in all of which matters the Curate was duly consulted by his host's daughters, who looked upon him rather in the light of an elder brother, they having no such relative of their own. They were three bright, merry-hearted, girls, well-trained by a shrewd mother and a clever governess, who, luckily for them, thought that being natural, unaffected, and anxious to please others was of nearly as much importance to a young lady as taking a first class in physiology, algebra, or political economy.

The rooms were large, and well fitted for the occasion ; a capital ball-room, the study for a dressing-room, which led into the drawing-room, where a stage had been set up, with an army of chairs for the audience. Through all these Norton was in due order conducted ; and at last, by universal request, he undertook the office of stage-manager and prompter.

"You *must* take it, Mr. Norton," said Lucy Markham, "because papa is so slow in giving his orders, and, besides that, so doubtful about his French. One of the scenes, you know, is to be done in French, just to please mamselle, and we shall want an awful lot of prompting then."

And so it was all finally settled. The guests, who were young people under sixteen, mostly under the charge of mammas and governesses, soon began to arrive ; and amidst shouts of laughter, loud talking, and happy whispers, small flirtations, and bash-

ful lovemakings, the audience soon crowded into boxes, pit, and gallery, and the performance commenced.

The charades went off as such exhibitions often do, far better than they strictly deserved. The actors and actresses were all well known to the audience ; now and then a mistake was made, and far oftener a hit ; the mistakes were excused, and the successes voted to be splendid, and cheered to the echo. Everybody was in a good temper, and determined to be pleased. When, therefore, the performance was concluded, it was amidst noisy shouts of congratulation on all sides ; and even Norton came in for his share of the applause as manager and prompter.

Then came the ball, of which all that need be said is, that if bright faces, merry voices, and tremendous appetites for supper, are any marks of success, this one was pre-eminently successful. Right and left of

him Norton found a crowd of noisy, chattering, young people, telling with eager delight of their evening's enjoyment ; they had never known such a good party, nor things go off so well. And as this was to many of them a first experience of such delights, they were probably in the right.

All this time the banquet was going mightily forward, and Norton, to his great amusement, had taken down several successive couples of young ladies, duly drank as many glasses of champagne, and talked a great deal of nonsense.

" You are a terrible flirt, I am afraid," said Lucy Markham to him after an expedition of this kind, as he sauntered back through some groups still loitering in the ball-room ; " you are a terrible flirt, for Jenny Robinson and Fanny Wheeler have both come to me within the last five minutes to say that they never had such ' a delicious partner ' in their lives. But I won't scold

you or be jealous, because you have been so good, and helped us so much all the evening, and especially because I want you to do something else."

"Miss Markham has only to speak," replied Norton, "and her slave has but to obey."

"Thanks, a thousand times. Have you really had any supper yourself, Mr. Norton?"

"Well, I have convoyed down to the banquet a dozen or two of very charming partners, and have tasted a few glasses of champagne, and, I think, a morsel of tipsy cake with a charming little maiden of about seven, who insisted on my having something to eat; but that was an hour ago."

"Good," replied his companion. "You really want and deserve some supper; and you shall have some. You see that young lady in white muslin, with her back to you, sitting at the piano with all that crowd of girls about her?"

"Yes."

"She is the dearest little creature in the whole room, and a particular friend of mine and of mamselle; has been playing away for the last half-hour for the little ones to have a dance of their own, and now they are teasing her to sing. Now, I know that she has had no supper, though she will say nothing about it; and I want you to come up at once and rescue her, and carry her off into the other room. She came over here with a carriage full of Estcourts from Plymridge, and they give her no peace when they get her out anywhere, because of her splendid voice. Come along with me, and I will introduce you."

They pushed their way from group to group across the room, and at last got to the piano, where the young girl still sat with her back to them, and at the very point, it seemed, of beginning a song.

"No, no, Mary," said Norton's guide in

a merry voice, “no more singing to-night, Mary. You are to go down this moment and have some supper, and here is Mr. Norton, stage-manager, prompter, and master of the ceremonies, dying to make your acquaintance and convoy you, as he says, to the banquet.”

At these words the lady in white muslin rose from her seat, and, as she suddenly turned round, Norton suddenly found himself face to face with Mary Hastings.

To say that amazement filled the faces of the stage-manager and his *vis-à-vis* would be little. It was amazement so intense and so profound as for the moment to deprive both of the power of speech. And luckily for them, before either could find words to express their astonishment, the hostess herself exclaimed, in utter wonder,

“Why, what on earth is the matter with you two good people, staring at each other in this unaccountable fashion? Miss Mar-

shall, Mr. Norton is dying to make your acquaintance. Mr. Norton, Miss Marshall—a great friend of mine, must be taken a great deal of care of. Please to carry her away to supper at once."

"The fact is," said Norton, at last blundering into speech, "that Miss Marshall and I chanced to see each other some years ago, and this sudden meeting was so unexpected that—that it took us both by surprise."

"Sudden and unexpected meetings," replied Lucy Markham, "generally do take people rather by surprise. But I forgive you both," she added, with a hearty laugh, "until after supper, and then I shall give you both a good scolding for not telling me before that you were such old friends as I see you really are."

This was said in a good-humoured quiet whisper, for there were eager eyes and sharp ears all round on the *qui vive*, eagerly watching what was going on; and Norton

was only too unutterably happy to offer his arm to ‘the charming little lady in white muslin,’ and take her away into the busier and less observant crowd downstairs.

One, only one, look at the soft, loving, hazel eyes told him that however long ago Gala-day might have been, he was not forgotten; they had opened wide in sheer amazement as they first gazed at him, but were now filled with that happy light which is sometimes more eloquent than the lips. A flush, too, of delicate and dainty pink had come back upon the pale face, like the rosy tint on a sea-shell, though the hand still trembled on his arm, and a heart close by it still beat in strange and wayward excess of joy.

The stairs were crowded as they went down, and talking was going on in every group of passers-by; but neither of the two had said a word to each other as yet (though nobody noticed this), and, indeed, it was

hard to know what to say, or how to begin the conversation.

All that Norton knew was that it seemed to him a time of such intense blissfulness as to need no spoken word whatever. The treasure of his life had come back to him when hope seemed all gone. It was the real veritable M. H., whom he had given up in despair long ago, alive again, and hanging on his arm.

CHAPTER XII.

A FEAST WITH THE GODS.

WHETHER Norton supped that night on nectar and ambrosia, he never clearly knew nor cared to know. What he ate, what he drank, was a matter of supreme and absolute indifference to him. If he ate chicken or mayonnaise of lobster, it was with no consciousness of any difference between the two viands ; both were ambrosial. If he quaffed claret cup or Sillery, it was of no earthly vintage.

So the two young people crept away to a little side-table in a corner, near a door that

opened into the conservatory, as Norton well knew. He was the first to break silence, for she was (as he saw) still trembling with excitement and amaze at their sudden meeting.

“Before you say one word,” whispered Norton “you must have some wine and some chicken.” And he instantly proceeded to pile her plate with such an extraordinary collection of wings and legs as forced her to laugh outright. But, under severe threats of calling in Mrs. Markham’s aid (which she knew he never meant to fulfil), the champagne was at last drunk and a morsel of bread eaten.

“And now,” he said, “while all this hubbub is going on, in the name of all that is wonderful, tell me who you are and where you come from, Miss Marshall. Let us both pretend, at all events, to be eating and drinking mightily, that we may talk all the more securely. Can I really believe my

eyes that tell me you are the very same M. H. that I parted from in the old, happy, days of long ago?"

"Hush!" she answered; "for heaven's sake call me Miss Marshall, whatever you may think, Mr. Norton, or some busybody or other may overhear you. I dare not, cannot tell you more *now* than that I am living as a governess in a family near here, and that in five minutes our carriage will be stopping the way."

"Governess," he replied, "or no governess, you must not escape me again to-night, or you may suddenly disappear for another five years, or never come to light again. You cannot possibly go home alone to-night?"

"Certainly not. I shall go back to Plymridge as I came, with a whole carriageful of children; and followers are strictly forbidden. Governesses are supposed to have no male acquaintances; and Mrs.

Estcourt knows that I have none, either as friends or relations. So your going with us is impossible, as well as highly improper. Our next meeting must be a chance one like this."

"No more trusting to chance," he answered. "I have been living on chances and hopes for too long a winter now that spring has suddenly burst upon me, to begin with starvation again. Tell me that I may write or call at Plymridge, I implore you. Surely Mrs. Estcourt cannot be such an ogre as to debar all visitors, even a country curate?"

"An ogre!" she replied, looking up with a happy smile upon her face; "an ogre! she is the dearest and best friend I have in the world. But you must not write. I must have time to think."

"I thought that I was a friend once," he said very humbly. "Have you quite forgotten me?"

“Do I look as if I had?”

“No, no, no,” he answered, as he glanced down at the bright, happy, shy face that had haunted his happiest dreams for so many long days; “forgive me for teasing you. The fact is that I am half mad with joy, and hardly know what I am saying. It all seems like a dream even now. Forgive me for trying to prove to myself you were no shadow, but the—”

At this instant a stentorian voice shouted into the room,

“Miss Marshall’s carriage stops the way!”

And so Norton’s passionate words were suddenly nipped in the bud.

“And now, Mr. Norton,” she whispered, in a grave, quiet voice that sounded like music in his ear, “please to leave off being mad, and come and help me to find my children—three little girls in white, with blue ribands in their hair, and a young

scapegrace in velvet knickerbockers of an ogrish fashion; or, better still, find them for me while I say good-night to the Markhams."

And, with these words, she slipped away through the merry throng, and left Norton to execute her commands.

In a few minutes he had found the whole party, and was ready in the hall to put on Miss Marshall's shawl and take her to the carriage.

They shook hands in the most formal fashion at the carriage-door, and parted with words that even John Thomas might hear without the faintest interest or suspicion of their being anything but the merest acquaintance.

"Good night, Mr. Norton; I am sorry to have kept you waiting so long, and will really behave better the next time. Good-night."

And then the carriage rolled away into

the darkness, and left the Curate of Danbury almost as much puzzled as ever, though happier than he had been for many a long day.

A ray of hope had suddenly beamed in upon him when least expected, and, after the weary mystery and darkness of Saltram, was doubly welcome. It was true that Edith Jervis had been a great friend to him; she had interested him more than any other woman had ever done; but she had begun by being a puzzle and a mystery, and ended by becoming a thought of anxious pain.

As he looked back upon the events of the last few months, they suddenly seemed to have lapsed into a past utterly remote from him. That terrible letter of guilty confession, which only a short time before had appeared to him so full of touching remorse and womanly tenderness, now seemed utterly changed in aspect and character. A gulf had come between him and that hopeless

story of blighted hope and blighted affection that made it seem almost unreal. And yet a second thought told him it was all as real and true as anything that had since happened. The soft dreamy eyes, the pale face worn with intense sorrow, the whole expression of silent suffering and passionate hatred, were all before him in a moment. So deeply had they touched him that he had asked this woman to be his wife. Of all this there could be no doubt.

But he had never really loved her—never as a man should love the woman to whom he offers his heart; and she, with the rare sagacity of a true woman, had of course seen this at once, as she hinted in her words about pity and the possibility of his being mistaken.

False he never had been, never could be to M. H. Such an idea was absurd, impossible. From their first meeting on that far-off, happy Gala-day at Tregartha to this

very hour, when, after the company were all gone, he smoked a quiet pipe under the lime-trees at Dormouth Court, his love for her had been undoubted and unbroken. For a time it had been hidden, for a time delayed; many obstacles had beset it, many temptations tried it—for when did the course of true love ever run smoothly? But now all difficulties were at an end; all was smooth water, fair wind, and sunshine.

Such was the tenour of his thoughts as he strolled up and down under the quiet stars, and watched the broad arch of heaven grow brighter as the night waned. His happiness was sudden and deep—almost too deep to be unmixed; and, in spite of all his clever reasonings with himself, there mingled with it a tinge of sorrowful regret for her whose dream of life seemed all darkness, while his sparkled with happy light. He even regretted his own hasty words, spoken on the impulse of the moment. But words can no

more be unsaid than deeds undone. And with this sage reflection he went off to bed.

The next morning, at breakfast, an unusually hearty welcome awaited him. Everybody seemed curiously anxious to know how he had slept, whether his dreams had been pleasant, and whether his appetite was good. His friend Lucy was specially solicitous and specially saucy.

“How can you possibly doubt,” she said, turning to her father, “that Mr. Norton passed a horrible night, and had most agonising dreams, after stealing a march upon us all in that shameful manner, and carrying off my dear Mary Marshall down to supper like an old friend. Now I see why he accepted the invitation in such hot haste — after flirting, too, with Fanny Wheeler and Jessie Tinling the whole evening. How could he possibly sleep a wink?”

“And yet,” says papa, “he looks well, my dear, for a sleepless knight.”

“Hurrah!” shouted Dick, from the end of the table; “hurrah! for the first pun papa ever made.”

“Accuse me of anything you please, young people, except the crime of joking on such a grave subject. But you see, Mr. Norton, what a set of scapegraces I have here. No wonder they treat you so badly when they find me guilty of punning on your reverence’s sorrows.”

Norton defended himself as well as he could in the midst of abundance of small talk of this kind. And so the breakfast went gaily on, he wisely treating the sallies that greeted him on all sides with the same good humour that prompted them, and thus managing to escape without being betrayed into a single direct answer.

“Shall I drop you at Danbury?” says the master of the house, as the carriage

drove round. I start for Dorminster in ten minutes."

But this question was answered for him in a way that settled the matter at once without appeal.

"Certainly not, papa," answers Lucy; "we mean to keep him here all day. He has no parish now to look after; and it's my firm belief that there really is nothing whatever to do at Danbury, or not half so much as there was at Saltram. We have seen nothing of Mr. Norton for months, and I specially want his advice; so pray do not entice him away from us."

Then the party broke up for a time; and, Norton being left to his own devices, wandered away into the conservatory, where some half-hour later he was joined by Lucy Markham, who at once attacked him in her usual style of saucy bantering.

"Mr. Norton," she said, "may I beg your serious attention for a few minutes?"

“As many minutes as you please; I am all attention.”

“That is a very proper and becoming frame of mind for a gentleman when a lady requires his services, and I hope it will last. Now listen. In the first place are you inclined to be very obliging and obedient, and to execute a commission for me without asking any questions as to why and wherefore?”

“If the commission is at all a reasonable one.”

“Very good,” said the laughing girl; “my request is a very reasonable and, I hope, not an unpleasant one,—entirely for your good. It is simply that you will convey a note for me to a friend, not very far off, and bring me back an answer.”

“Nothing can be easier,” he replied, “and being for my good as you say, nothing more pleasant.”

“But in this case virtue must be its

own reward, and you must be content to do my bidding and ask no question as to the results. Do you still agree ? ”

“ I am at Miss Markham’s command and ready to fly at a moment’s notice.”

“ Good again,” she replied. “ Can you keep a secret ? ”

“ Try me.”

“ I prefer having a direct answer. Can you and will you ? ”

“ If you trust me.”

“ Very well. In the course of the morning while walking with you among the rough stones near the water-fall, *where you insist on taking me*,—now don’t interrupt me, but listen ; where you insist, I say, on taking me, I shall slip and slightly sprain my ankle. This will prevent my walking over to Plymridge after lunch to-day, as I solemnly promised Mary Marshall I would do ; and the consequence will be that I shall have to beg you to carry

a note to that lady, begging her to come here without delay. You having helped to deposit me on the sofa, will set out instanter, and bring me back an answer without a moment's delay. Are you still willing to agree to my conditions?"

"More than willing," he answered, with sparkling eyes. "What your riddle means I won't dare to ask or attempt to guess; but I am delighted to obey, and ready to set out for the water-fall at this moment."

"No doubt you are, and so manage to upset all my plan, as you gentlemen always do when they have to practice a little patience. In two hours from this time you will find me ready on the terrace, and most likely my little sister Fanny with me. Till then not a word more. You must not only keep my secret, but take care that not a creature about the house for a moment suspects you of having one."

"But why in the world." said he, "all

this mystery? Why not send me off to Plymridge at this very moment?"

"Mr. Norton, I am ashamed of you, positively ashamed. No questionings, no surmisings, or I wash my hands of the whole affair, and go into Dorminster shopping with mamma. There goes the pony-carriage round to the front door now. Shall I call John and tell him to wait for me?"

"For Heaven's sake no!" he cried, with such unmistakable energy as to make his companion burst into a hearty laugh.

"Ah!" she said, "I thought I should bring you to your senses. One word more. I saw Mary last night, for five minutes alone, and must see her again to-day. Now do you understand, O obtuse young man? Good-bye till 12 o'clock."

With these words and a merry glance from a pair of mischievous blue eyes, she left him, and he presently heard her

thundering away at a noisy duet on the piano with a younger sister in the next room.

And so Norton was left to his own reflections.

Two hours is no very lengthy period of time to be whiled away in a pleasant country house and grounds, especially where one feels perfectly at home, either indoors or out. But on that special morning to Norton it seemed to be endless. He tried a book in the library, a quiet pipe in the rosery among the lime trees, and finally a chat with the gardener; but all seemed wearisome and unprofitable. One thought, and only one, filled his mind, and that was the hope of once more seeing the face that had so brightly dawned upon him on the previous evening.

Whatever the mystery of the note and the sprained ankle might mean, there could be no doubt that they furnished him with

the means of calling at Plymridge, and once there, whatever Mrs. Estcourt might say or do, he must at all events see Mary Hastings. And with this thought he was obliged to be content. Slowly and wearily the minutes went by ; but at last, *at last*, the terrible two hours came to an end, and as the clock struck twelve he hurried down to the terrace.

There the two girls were waiting for him, and after a preliminary discussion as to where their walk should be, Norton proposed, and after some opposition carried his point, that they should stroll down to the water-fall and look for ferns. The plan was duly carried out, the ferns carefully collected ; and as they recrossed the stream, by the stepping-stones below the fall, suddenly occurred the fatal slip that had been foretold. Of course, with a sprained ankle, however slight, it is impossible to walk ; and that arch-hypocrite Lucy Markham had

to be carefully supported by her two companions, as she slowly hobbled back to the house.

In five minutes she was safely deposited on a sofa and carefully waited on by her sisters, the governess, and housekeeper, all in a state of anxious alarm at the sad accident. It was as much as Norton could do to keep his countenance tuned to the required pitch of gravity; and especially the invalid, who merrily exclaimed,

“Now, my dear people, pray don’t be alarmed; it’s only a sprain of the smallest possible extent, and I shall be quite well to-morrow. If you want something to do, please to scold Mr. Norton, who would insist on my crossing by the stepping-stones covered with slippery moss, though I told him beforehand—(ask him if I did not)—what would happen. It is his fault entirely. I shall lose my pleasant walk to Plymridge, and have to send off a note to my dear

Mary Marshall, explaining why I cannot come. Will any good Samaritan give me a scrap of note paper, that I may send off a line explaining matters and begging her to come and see a sprained ankle?"

There were hosts of offers to write for her; but, strange to say, Lucy insisted on being her own scribe, though the note seemed to occupy the briefest possible space.

"There," she said, when it was duly sealed, "as a punishment for your carelessness, Mr. Norton, you will have to carry this to Flymridge; good two miles of dusty turnpike road each way, and as the walk is a very lonely one, you will, I trust, have time to think over your misdeeds. I allow you ten minutes for lunch, and only ten, mind."

"Many thanks, your Majesty," replied Norton, fully entering into the spirit of the joke; "many thanks for allowing me a mor-

sel of lunch. Your commands shall be fulfilled to the letter, and you may depend on my coming back full of the most genuine repentance. Only one word more and I am off. As yet I have not the faintest notion in what direction my route lies, or whereabouts Plymridge may be.

“Ignorance is always excusable when accompanied by a proper readiness to learn,” said his mistress. “The road is plain as A. B. C.; straight across our lawn, then turn to the right along a straight turnpike road to the clump of firs on the bit of waste ground outside the park gates. Then turn sharp to the left; but stay, I will be merciful. Take the stile opposite the park gates, and follow the foot-path across the fields, direct to Plymridge. There goes the luncheon-bell. Now, good people, be off, and send me up a good supply of chicken, for sprained ankles give one an awful appetite.”

In less than ten minutes from that time Norton was going down the hot dusty road at a great pace. What was luncheon to a man hungering for the glimpse of but one sweet face? What were miles of dust, if they brought him to his own true love?

The clump of firs were to be made out almost as soon as he started; for they were situated on a high ridge of furzy down, and visible for miles round across the neighbouring country. He walked as if on air, with winged feet.

CHAPTER XIII.

SUNSHINE.

NEARER and nearer came the firs, nearer and nearer drew the goal ; only a few path-fields beyond them was the presence he longed for ! And yet he found himself lingering as the white space between him and the shade grew smaller and smaller, and he could clearly make out the patch of dark shadow lying across the dusty road. Presently he stood under the pleasant shade, and looked across the wide expanse of green meadows, sunny corn-fields, hedgerows, wooded hill and dale, that lay at his feet stretching

away to the quiet towers of Dorminster Abbey. The bright flush of summer hung over the whole scene, and whispered to him of hope and good fortune. It was the most charming landscape he had seen for years ; but its highest charm was that it whispered to him of Plymridge, and told him to be gone. Full of happy thoughts, he had lingered to enjoy them ; now he hurried eagerly away, knowing that every step brought him nearer to their one source and spring.

Turning hastily round by the cluster of furze, he hastened across the road, and then, to his amazement and delight, found himself face to face once more with the object of his thoughts. She had at that moment left the fields, and was even more amazed than her happy lover.

“ This is good fortune, indeed,” he cried. “ I was on my way to Plymridge, and suddenly there appears the very lady of whom I am in search.”

"Surely you were not coming to call on me," she said, as a guilty flush of uncontrollable pleasure gave new beauty to her cheek, "after all I said last night. Miss Markham told me expressly that you went back to Danbury early this morning."

"Thank God! I did not. I was ordered to stay at 'The Court' by that very lady herself; and by her sent off with a note to her dear friend Mary Marshall, to say that she had sprained her ankle, and could not stir, but must see you at once."

"There," he added, producing the dainty epistle; "there are my credentials, the most charming I ever bore, for which I bless the giver a thousand times as I look into her friend's face and see my reward."

The young girl's hands trembled as they unfolded the note, and her eyes sparkled with quick lustre as they read its contents; but she said not a word, and stood silent and confused

before him for whom her heart was beating with joy at that very moment.

“For God’s sake,” he exclaimed more passionately than ever, “for God’s sake, Mary, do not be angry with me! Only to see you once again gives me new life; but tell me, only tell me to go, and I will leave you at once. Only speak!”

“Alas!” she answered, “I ought not to be here, and you ought not to be speaking such words as you have done, but I cannot tell you to go—”

“Thank God! thank God! for that,” he cried, eagerly interrupting her, “you will not, cannot tell me to go; you have let your heart speak for you, Mary. How shall I ever thank you for such goodness? I have no words fit or worthy to tell my own love. I can do nothing but say that my whole life and being are yours and yours only; that I have lived and thought only for you, ever since that day of all days on Tregartha

Green,—all through the long, weary, hopeless, and dark years that followed, till God brought me to Danbury and crowned my life with sunshine. Give me but a word, Mary, and I am content, but a single word ! ”

“ I believe you,” replied the soft sweet voice; and then the tender, loving, brown eyes looked up into Harry Norton’s, all bright with tears that told him his suit had not been in vain.

There was no need, then, of any more spoken words; for love has a silent language of its own, more eloquent than the tongue,

“ Or music in its sweetest key ;”

and so, under the soft whisper of the tall fir-trees by Dorminster Ridge, the old, old, story that springs again ever new for happy youth, was told once more. They sat together on the rustic seat by the lonely hill-side, with bright and golden summer all

round them, in the waving corn, in the peaceful meadow lands, in the purple haze; in the quiet green valleys, and the soft grey clouds that floated idly along the hills,—summer in the flowers at their feet, and summer in their hearts.

How long the delicious dream would have lasted Cupid himself only knows. But the enchanted dreamers were suddenly roused from it by the sound of wheels, as a pair of grey ponies flashed quickly by, and announced that Mrs. Markham was on her way back from her Dorminster shopping, and it was time to part.

Luckily for them, the friendly clump of firs hid the lovers from that lady's sharp eyes, and thus prevented her from carrying back a budget of news to his friends at 'The Court.'

* * * *

"And did you know, sir," said a happy voice, as they still lingered in the happy

shade for one more final word, “did you know the contents of this wicked little note of Lucy’s ?

“ Not a single word. Honour bright. Not a word. But for all that it is the most precious little morsel of MS. ever penned by fair fingers, though it tells only of a sprained ankle and a disconsolate maiden on a sofa.”

“ I believe,” said his companion, “ that you are a couple of very shameful, wicked, schemers, and that I have been plotted against and waylaid, and —”

In whatever way the charge might have been completed is unknown, as it was suddenly put an end to by the lips being pressed into active service of another kind.

Then followed a quiet walk across the fields,—Mary utterly refusing under the circumstances to go back then to the **Markhams**, and Norton as firmly insisting on not leaving

her until she was fairly in sight of Plym-ridge House.

The last field was reached when, with pale face and amidst a flush of strange tears, she said to him, “I have a secret to tell you that you ought to know, that you ought to have known long, long, before you spoke those rash words, Harry ; and yet I hardly know how to tell it. It may make you unsay them, and repent of your bargain.”

“Never,” he cried, “never. But I don’t wish to hear any secrets, least of all a sad one. I am too happy, dearest, to cause a speck of cloud in my darling’s eyes. To-day is too bright now for a word of trouble ; let it be bright to the end. One more kiss, only one, and I *will* really go.”

As they parted she gave him the little note which had brought such sudden joy to both. It was but a single line.

“I hope you will enjoy your *tête-à-tête.*”

“LUCY.”

That night the Curate went back to his quiet rooms at Danbury with a new motive for life and for work; a motive that never failed him for many a long year.

The next day, to everybody's amazement, Miss Lucy Markham's sprained ankle got suddenly well. Only two people besides herself ever knew of the conspiracy; and they were both discreetly silent.

CHAPTER XIV.

HYMEN, O HYMENÆE, HYMEN.

SOME months passed away before Norton's engagement began to be known or even suspected anywhere beyond the domains of Plymridge. Of Mrs. Estcourt, Mary Hastings had of course at once naturally made a friend and confidant; asking her, however, for a time not to mention the precious secret; until, in fact, paffairs were really more settled, and the two persons chiefly concerned had begun to realize it as a fact.

At Dormouth Court, under the guidance

of Lucy **Markham**, a good deal of quiet quizzing went on from time to time; and Norton now and then got well scolded for daring to take away from them so popular and useful a personage as Miss Marshall seemed to be wherever she was known. But all this, and much more good-natured banter of the same kind, he was gladly content to bear, as long as he knew that his prize was safe. If he could not see the face of the charmer quite so often as he wished, for that would have been every day, he had a very pleasant time of it in riding or walking over to Plymridge once or twice a week, and getting a glimpse of her at luncheon, or in a stroll through the gardens. The lady of the house made herself especially agreeable to him. She remembered that she herself had once been young—young and in love; and in the house of an old maiden aunt who looked upon all such matters as courting and flirtation as “something tolerable and not to

be endured" unless conducted in the presence of some recognized authority, with all the formality of a game at chess ; and therefore she determined that the two young people should have a pleasant time of it.

"I cannot have you here, Mr. Norton," she said, "making open love to their governess before my children's eyes, but we shall always expect you to dinner once in the week, as a matter of course ; and I dare say you will now and then chance to fall in Miss Marshall's way when strolling towards 'The Court,' with my young people. In common politeness you will see the ladies safely to their home. Not that I forgive you for daring to come and take her away at all. Here, in this quiet place, charming as she is, I thought we had her safe and sound for the next ten years to come ; for though every marriageable man that came this way fell in love with her, she kept them all at such a formidable distance, that the news

of your appearance in the field fairly astounded me. Will this content you?"

In reply to this, Norton could only murmur his grateful thanks, "though he could scarcely," he said, "expect anything but true kindness from one of Miss Marshall's truest and kindest friends."

Now and then, too, there was some sort or other of a gathering at Dormouth Court, and in that case more than the chance of a quiet chat in the conservatory, or even in a crowded supper-room. And, if all these chances failed, there were the never-failing letters, which neither party seemed ever weary of despatching or receiving.

How these mighty budgets were filled, sheet after sheet, with what light, pleasant, trivial, foolish, delicious nonsense, all readers that are worth their salt know full well; or once knew in "the purple light of youth,"—

"When time seemed young, and life a thing divine,
And hope sat brooding like a beauteous dove,
All in the golden prime of early love."

There is no need therefore to say that the Curate of Danbury was happy, and that the months sped swiftly and gaily by. He began to look forward earnestly and hopefully to the future. His work was all such as he could do easily and well. The trustees were more than satisfied with him. He had leisure to work for more than one editor; and though some of his articles were now and then rejected, he often had the pleasure of seeing others in print, and of submitting them to another critic even more partial and more delighted than himself. And what pleased him best of all was that this critic did not belaud him with words of indiscriminate praise, but of womanly good sense and taste. She even sometimes found fault with him, but so charmingly and with so dainty a pen

that the process was even pleasanter than praise. He felt that he was understood and appreciated, and this added new life and strength even to the love that had already filled his heart.

There was but one thing more needed to make his happiness complete, and that was the presence of his loving critic at Danbury itself. Of this, however, as yet he had not ventured to whisper a word, even at Plymridge.

As to Mary Hastings herself, the time was to her no less joyous than to him ; and to her it brought almost absolute content. Her life had hitherto been a broken one ; chequered with many a dark shadow, but now all troubles seemed to have disappeared ; and though the future lay before her all bright and unclouded, she was content with the present ; and to quote our old friend the poetical postman, she went about the house “like a bird,” singing softly little

snatches of quiet, happy, song, for very joy of heart.

This was the state of affairs when one soft autumnal afternoon Norton started for a garden party at Dormouth Court. There was to be croquet, and archery, and boating on the lake,—to be wound up with a sort of picnic tea on the lawn before it grew dusk; and to this entertainment his old ally, Miss Lucy, had written to him a very saucy invitation, which ended thus:—

“If you manage properly, and don’t get involved in an endless game of croquet, you and a certain other body may make your way quietly down to the waterfall and hunt for ferns. This time, no doubt, you will take care that the lady shall not sprain her ankle.”

And once more the prophecy was a true one. “In the thick of the fight,” as the prophetess recommended, the two slipped away from the crowded lawn, and wandered

quietly away down to the river below the lake ; and then followed a long dialogue, of which a small portion must be left to tell its own story. Ferns had been duly hunted for, found, and left forgotten among the mossy stones where they grew ; the river had been safely crossed and re-crossed, while Norton gaily told the story of the sprained ankle in detail ; and they were now idling away the happy hour on the steps of an old sun-dial, in a little open space called the Wilderness.

“ You have accused me,” he said, “ of planning and plotting with Lucy Markham—”

“ *Miss* Lucy Markham, if you please, sir ; I don’t allow you to call young ladies by their Christian names in that easy fashion, whatever *they* may think of it. *Miss* Lucy, —now go on.”

“ I beg her pardon and yours, *Miss* Hastings. Well, you accuse us both of

plotting and setting a trap for you, but I have never yet heard how or why you came to be journeying over to ‘The Court’ on that special afternoon ?”

“ Came to be journeying ? ” she repeated. “ Simply to meet Lucy who had promised the night before that she would come and have a good long chat with me. She was dying, she said, to know how, where, and when the Curate of Danbury and Miss Marshall had ever met. We seemed to be quite old friends, when she didn’t even know that we were acquaintances.”

“ And you were going to tell her the whole story, were you ? ”

“ A little bit of it, perhaps,—as much as she deserved. But she had guessed a good deal even then ; a great deal more, in fact, sir, than I had to tell. For what could I have told her, except that on a certain feast-day, long ago, in a little out-of-the-way place called Tregartha, I had danced a

country dance with a very dull, stupid, partner, whom I had never seen but once since that day, till he was suddenly introduced to me at Dormouth Court?"

"Only once, Mary," he said, "only once, I freely own; and *that* by the merest chance—the forgetfulness of old Rookstone's clerk. But what a 'once' that was! Do you remember the little window, and my darling in her white dress, looking out at the twilight? And what an idiot I was!"

"An idiot! were you, sir? Well, the word is your own; and, of course, you know best, but do you mean specially on that evening? Now I think of it, you did talk in rather a demented fashion."

"No doubt," he answered, with a hearty laugh, no doubt. "I was half crazy with joy, and hardly knew what I said or did. But my idiotic folly lay in never calling at Rose Cottage afterwards; never inventing an excuse for another visit until it was too late.

Can you imagine my state of mind when at last I found Rose Cottage empty, and not a single trace of you left? No wonder, dearest, that I call myself an idiot, to let you escape in that sudden and mysterious fashion. But it was very wicked of you to disappear without a single word or sign—and—”

“Stop,” she cried, “you must not ask me why we disappeared in that strange fashion, for I cannot answer you if you do. You must be content to know that it was, then, the wisest, best, only thing to be done; and not ask a single question.”

“Content?” said Norton, “a thousand times more than content, if you bid me; you vanished and carried away the light out of my heart for a time, but now it has all come back again, and the night is over—my darling is my own. I care for no more questions; you told me that Good-bye meant meeting again; and what an age ago it all seems!

What an age, Mary, even since the charades at Dormouth Court !”

“The very reverse to me,” said the young girl. “The days rush by, the months vanish—I scarcely know how. So bright, so happy, if they would but last ;” and the nutbrown eyes sparkled into happy tears as she spoke.

The tears had to be removed, of course; and removed they were by that happy and summary process which Cupid invented for the distraction of mankind; during which the operator murmured many tender little nothings that only love’s ear cares to hear.

“ You were quite right, though,” says Amator “ to say *if they would but last!* Such days were never meant to last, but to bring on a brighter day still; the day when sunshine is to come to quiet old Danbury itself, and find a new home there. Think, my darling, how I have waited, and worked, and hoped for you all these years ! ”

And then he pleaded long and tenderly that she would come and brighten his

Christmas fireside, and turn January into May for him ; and at last she so far gave way as to say, “ Perhaps, perhaps, and perhaps ” for April in the new year.

“ But the winter,” she saucily added, “ is good for you, too ; the long, lonely, evenings, and tramping through wind and snow to Plymridge and ‘ The Court,’ in search of a morsel of society, will teach you not to value yourself too highly. Spring shall come, all in good time.”

And then the talk wandered away (as they sauntered slowly back) to the old captains at Danbury, and Norton had to describe them and all his daily routine of work there ; next it touched upon Gresley, about whom she had much to ask, and he was never weary of answering.

“ He is one of my dearest and best friends,” said Norton, “ who did more to cheer me up in the old dark days than I can tell you now. *He* never gave up hoping.”

“And was I worth waiting and hoping for so long ? ” said a soft, loving voice *in his ear*; “and have you told him that you had found the lost Mary Hastings ? ”

“Not a word, yet, dearest ; I have neglected him and a host of friends most shamefully. I have owed him a letter for months. But you fill up all my time, all my thoughts. Mary,” he added very gravely, “it must not be a day later than March ! You see how shamefully I am behaving even to my old friends ! ”

“Not idiotic again, sir, I hope ? ”

And there the dialogue suddenly ended, as they reached the border of the croquet lawn, and found high tea and picnic going on mightily in the tent.

A hearty welcome awaited them in the tent ; for, even though disposed of, Norton was still most popular among the young ladies, and Mary herself was too good and gracious not to be forgiven for having carried off such an eligible prize.

“Mary dear,” whispered Lucy Markham, as they parted that night, “they are all, in reality, as jealous of you as they can be; but you have been so nice and so quiet, and, well, so like yourself, about him that they dare not say a word. But keep him in good order,” she added aloud, while Markham drew near as shawl-bearer, “keep him in good order; these young curates are apt to get so horribly conceited.”

“Make him wait,” added Paterfamilias, who was busily speeding the parting guests; make him *wait*, my dear, not *too* long, but just enough to—”

“You are all of you very much mistaken,” cried a merry voice out of a pile of shawls; “he has been as good as gold, and in the course of a year or two he won’t mind waiting at all. Will you, Harry?” Then Miss Marshall’s carriage once more stopped the way—there was a great grind over the gravel path; and Mr. Norton having said good night

to his old friends, set out on a long and lonely walk to Danbury.

Full of happy thoughts, he wandered on under the soft, starlit, sky, musing many things, and thinking as he often did at such times of the mother whom he had lost, and to whom the thought of his present happiness would have been so dear. Every event and little incident in his life had always been to her a matter of deep and loving interest; and he had thought many a time with bitter regret that among all the welcomes which were waiting for Mary Hastings as his wife, one special one must be wanting.

He had spoken to Mary of this very point not long before, and now under the cold, silver, moonlight that chequered the white dusty road with patches of black shadow from the hedgerows, her quaint and quiet answer came back into his mind. It had struck him deeply when first spoken, but now in the profound stillness and calm that

seemed to steep all things far and near, it came back to him more forcibly than ever.

“The spirits of the dead,” she had said, “may be nearer to us than the spirits of the living, if they are all ministering spirits sent to minister to them that are heirs of salvation. Unseen, they may see us more clearly than when they saw us with bodily eyes. ‘*She*’ may know me even *now* better than I know myself.

‘They are all gone into a world of Light,
And I sit musing here alone.’

“So says your favourite poet, Harry; but though alone, there may be company all about me. I often see one whom I love in my dreams, as clearly as I can now see you; as plainly, as surely; is it so because a spirit itself is near when the eyes of the soul open in the watches of the night?” “I know of no reason why it should not be,” he had answered then, and again he answered to himself in the same way, as the thought

of Mary's words came into his mind, "I know of no reason now."

At that moment, he was passing from an intensely bright stretch of moonlit road into a patch of deep shade, and the transition was so sudden that for a moment he could make out nothing clearly ; for the shadows of the tall trees were presently broken up and shivered into trembling confusion where the boughs trembled lightly in the faint wind. It was like walking in fairy-land ; and he was just in the very mood to enter on such a domain. For there are times when the consciousness of man's inner being is most open to spiritual impressions, and his spirit wakes up to subtler, keener, intelligence than is wont.

It was so with Norton, now, when he least expected it. For such seasons come and go fitfully as the wind itself. Nay, if he had chosen a place as least likely to be beset with associations out of the common track, it would have been an open turnpike-road.

There, as far as he could see, it ran its well-known course, which he had traversed in the broad daylight some scores of times, a long white thread among the sombre meadows which he knew so well.

But overhead was the broad arch of heaven, and now at its full height of splendour ; the pathway specially studded with innumerable points of light,—other worlds, perchance, of which he knew nothing but that the Hand which set them in their eternal order had also made him—the one solitary wanderer through the night. It was so silent and so still that he could almost hear his own heart beat. And then all at once, he knew not whence or how, he became conscious of another presence. He neither heard the faintest footfall nor saw a vestige of outlined shape. But he knew that he was not alone. The knowledge was sweet, but it was terrible ; his eyes slowly closed as he stood there in the

moonlight, and with closed eyes he still saw the silver arrows glancing far and wide over hill and dale, falling at his very feet from Heaven ; and more wondrous still, close to him, within his reach, softer and brighter than any earthly light, the face of the unseen dead. The very face he knew so well ; the same, and yet unutterably changed ; transformed, glorious, immortal, and yet the same. It neither spoke nor moved, but its tender radiance shone into and upon him, and he stood entranced as if to new life and being.

How long the vision lasted, whether seconds or minutes, he never knew. How could he measure or limit the duration of things eternal ? But his eyes opened and he was alone.

Thus roused to a sense of his solitude, and to the remembrance that several miles of his journey were yet before him, he hastened on. As he gained the higher ground,

and the night waned, a breeze sprang up, armies of dark clouds came up the sky and blotted out the silver moonlight, and the rest of his walk was through a darkness as strange and gloomy as he ever remembered.

It was late when he reached Danbury, and there found a pile of letters awaiting him. There was but one in a familiar hand, and putting aside all the others until the next day, he opened that from his old friend Gresley, and read as follows. The first word which caught his eye was — PRIVATE—in large letters at the top of the page.

“What on earth can be the matter?” thought Norton. However, there it was, beyond a doubt,—PRIVATE.

“My dear Norton,

“Will you be so very kind as to do me a great favour? If you esteem me, as of yore, among the number of your friends,

I think you will scarcely refuse me the only favour I have ever asked you during the whole period of our acquaintance. (Utterly unlike Gresley, thought the reader, in style and in tone). Believe me, no one is more averse than myself to asking favours of anybody. I am too proud to be under any obligation to any one, even an old friend. Had I been less proud I might have done better; but be that as it may, the *first* favour I have ever asked of any one I now, my dear friend, *earnestly* ask of you. It is the ‘favour’ of an ‘answer’ to this letter, informing me how you are, and if still at Danbury.

“Ever yours,

“T. GRESLEY.

“P.S. You deserve neither a postscript nor a good story; but you shall have both.

“A jolly farmer came the other day to his pastor, and besought him to make him a promise. (The petitioner, you must know,

was violently addicted to beer, and whenever in a state of beer, subject to the tender importunities of a lady who sorely besieged him to marry her). ‘Well,’ says the pastor, ‘what is the nature of the promise, Mr. Bull?’ ‘It is this, your reverence, that you will never marry me when I am drunk; if you will promise me this, I’ll take darned good care you shan’t marry me when I am sober!’ What could the vicar do but promise? Bull deserves to escape, does he not? He is a sturdy old boy, some six feet high, and broad in proportion, who has weathered the winds and storms of life these fifty years, and as hard as granite. But who, my dear Norton, is a match for the wiles of the weaker, gentler, sex, and the charms of beauty? From the days of Samson down to the captive of Tregartha, who has ever escaped?”

The words of his old friend were doubly pleasant to Norton just then, and he deter-

mined to write a full, true, and particular account of all that happened at Plymridge; though too weary with his long walk, and too full of his strange vision in the moonlight to touch pens and ink that night.

It was long before sleep came, and then only in broken snatches; not filled, as one might have expected, with remembrances of the busy day just passed, but with wild fantastic dreams of danger and pursuit, with shadowy images of evil and hair-breadth escapes; such strange tricks does imagination play us, and so little are we master of our own inner life. There was not a single echo of Gresley or the moonlight walk. Broad sunshine, however, was streaming into his room when he at last awoke to the realities of another day.

Among the letters of the previous night was one in a strange hand, which he found to be Mr Searl. It contained strange and unexpected news which deserves a place in a new chapter.

CHAPTER XV.

I FORBID THE BANNS.

It was an ugly, illegible, ill-omened scrawl, but, when once deciphered, the contents were plain enough, and they flung Norton into a fever of angry surprise and annoyance.

“The trustees,” so wrote the secretary, “desire me to inform you that they never contemplated having a married man as Curate of Danbury; and a report (possibly untrue) having reached them that Mr. Norton contemplates entering the state of matrimony, to advise you at once of the

possible consequences of your taking any such step. It may involve, in fact, the election of a new officer at Danbury. A special meeting, however, will shortly be held, and the subject taken into express consideration."

Thus briefly, and, as Norton thought, snappishly, wrote Searl.

What was to be done? If he resigned his appointment at Danbury, years might pass away before he was again in a position to think of marriage; he must sink back into a mere parochial curate, and have to begin again at the bottom of the ladder. The chances seemed ten to one that the trustees would adhere to their absurd—yes, he must call it most absurd—notion about the founder's wish that the Curate of Danbury should be unmarried, and, in that case, he *must* resign. As to giving up M. H., or deferring his marriage until brighter and better days, the very idea was preposterous.

But immediate action was clearly necessary, and, after a long hour's consideration, he decided at once on applying personally to one of the trustees, and trying to discover exactly how the land lay. Gresley was too far off to consult for advice, and, somehow or other, the idea of paying another visit to his friends at 'The Court' seemed distasteful to him. Markham had a habit of calling in his wife and daughter to advise with him on such matters, and to such a council of war, Norton was disinclined to submit his troublesome secret. He, therefore, resolved to ride over to Saltram; he had owed them a visit for a long time, so that he had ample excuse, if any were needed, for calling.

He got to Saltram at luncheon time, and found the General at home.

"Master will be very glad to see you," said the old servant who admitted him, "so I think, sir, for he has been in great trouble about Mrs. Jervis for days past."

He was shown into the study, and there found General Dartlake gazing abstractedly out of the window, as if unconscious of the servant's announcement; but he turned round in a moment and welcomed Norton, though scarcely with his usual heartiness of manner.

"Glad to see you once more, Norton,—at last," he said; "I thought that we were never going to see you again."

"I deserve a good scolding," replied his guest, "and am come to throw myself on your mercy. My excuses you shall hear presently, when you have told me why you have been anxious about Mrs. Jervis, as your servant just now hinted to me."

"God help me!" replied the old man in a broken voice. "I have been in trouble indeed for the last month,—ever since, in fact, you were last here, I think. Up to that time, after her husband's death, Edith seemed more like herself than she had been

for years, but all at once she fell into a sad melancholy state, at times more terrible than ever. I have tried every means of rousing her,—change of scene, change of society,—but when the fit comes on, all in vain. I almost fear at times that her brain is wrong; she seems weighed down by some terrible burden, of the cause of which I can discover nothing; I question her, but can get no reply. Time, she says, is the only cure,—patience the only remedy. Again and again I have talked of writing to you, or sending for you, and only at her earnest entreaty refrained from doing so. Then come days of unusual brightness and vivacity, when she is the light and joy of the house, but only to give way to deeper gloom; all through the past week she has been quite herself again, but to-day, after a long ride, she has sunk down into utter silence and despair. You seemed at one time to have more influence over her than

any stranger in the old days ; Norton, for God's sake help me if you can."

"Here I am," answered Norton, "only too thankful if I can be of any use. Command me in any way you think best. What *can* I do ? "

"I am not sure that she will even see you," replied the General, "for when in this strange state she will admit no one ; but I left her in the dining-room, and we will take our chance and go in boldly as if all was well. Then do you act as you think best. She doesn't know of your being here ? "

"I think not," said Norton ; "at all events, the experiment can do no harm, and any phase of the evil may be better than mere apathy."

When they reached the dining-room, where luncheon was waiting, she sat—still in her riding-dress—fixed, as if frozen, in an attitude of stony melancholy, and, for a

moment, took no notice of their entrance. Norton spoke to her, even called her by name, but she made no answer, except by a grave, solemn, look that traversed his whole person, without a sign of recognition ; there she sat, with her fair hair falling loosely over her shoulders, silent and unmoved, like a statue of melancholy and beauty.

But, all at once, light sprang up, as if from some hidden depth, into the dreamy eyes, and the whole face beamed with animation. She rose hastily from her seat, shook him warmly by the hand, which she clasped with both hers, and with eager passion cried out, “ We have had such a ride, Mr. Norton,—the General and I,—away up past the lake at Ringwood, across the Downs, and back by Rainham Ford. If you had been here in time, you might have gone with us, and got an appetite for luncheon to match mine. Give me but a

moment to change my dress, and papa shall do the honours of the table."

In a few minutes she returned, with a bright flush of colour in her cheek, and a white rose in her bosom, all life, animation, and vivacity. Nothing could exceed the pleasant brilliancy of the little banquet, admirably good at all points, and crowned with some of the General's choicest vintage.

"Saunders," said the General, "let us have some of your best Cliquot, and welcome Mr. Norton's reappearance at Saltram. This is quite like old times."

Bumpers of the generous fluid were soon quaffed, and at a sign from his master the old butler retired, apparently in a well-pleased content that things were assuming something like a more normal condition, and that his wine was really drank and relished.

"And now, sir," said the host turning to Norton, half beside himself with joy at the

sudden change, “give an account of yourself and your doings at Danbury, or Edith and I will try you by court-martial for your shameful desertion of Saltram. Make a clean breast of it.”

To make a clean breast of it was just what Norton wished to do, and the more so, because it was the best, if not the only way of leading up to the very point that he wanted to bring under his host’s special notice; but the operation was by no means an easy one. His confession, to be complete, must be a lengthy one; it embraced others besides himself, and touched upon many points of delicacy in which those others were concerned. Above all, it had to be made in the presence of Edith Jervis; he had to narrate to her—a young and beautiful woman, to whom he had made an offer of marriage not so very long before,—all the circumstances of his now being actually engaged to another young and charm-

ing lady, who had, in fact, won his heart long years ago. It was a task neither easy nor pleasant; but Norton set to work with a good heart, resolving to make the best of it, and, above all, to speak quite frankly, whatever turn the conversation might take. And this last item of his resolve did much to carry him through, for his host was a gentleman, and knew when he was listening to one; and Edith Jervis had a deeper affection for the man she had refused than she had when he made the offer.

There is no need to repeat the story, with which the reader is already acquainted, of Norton's first acquaintance with Mary Hastings on the gala-day, the long years of doubt that followed, the history of his hopes and fears, and the strange and unexpected meeting at 'The Court,' its results, the then state of affairs, and Searl's letter. Norton told it all, as fully as need be, and found two most attentive listeners, one of

whom heard all the tale with unbroken interest and sparkling eyes to the very end.

“And now,” said Norton to the old man, “I am come to you for help and advice. What is best to be done? Entering into a correspondence with Searl will simply produce a series of unintelligible scrawls, hard to read, hard to quarrel with, and barren of all other fruit; and if I write to the trustees, it is still he who will carry on the war, and make it worse than useless.”

“Don’t waste a sheet of paper on him, Mr. Norton,” replied the General. “In the first place, because he is not worth it, and in the second, because he had a candidate of his own in the field from the very first, and therefore has no great love for you who defeated him. Leave it all to me; I will attend this next special meeting of the trustees, and fight your battle for you as far as it can be fought; and, unless the founder’s will is unusually strong and clear

on the point, I do not see how they can object to the Curate of Danbury being a married man. What say you, Edith?"

"Say, papa? What can I say but that if Mr. Norton was the best candidate as a bachelor, he must be better than best when he brings a wife with him to the good people of Danbury; it's rank heresy to come to any other conclusion. You must attend the meeting, of course, and compel all those old fogies to come to a right conclusion. Searl or no Searl, I do not see why a muddle-headed secretary should have the power or the right of upsetting a good appointment, simply because he takes a whim into his head."

"But, my dear," replied the General, "what am I but an old fogey myself? And they may say that I have nothing but a whim in my own head, which I am trying to force into theirs."

"If so," answered his daughter merrily,

"refer them to me; and get them to appoint a sub-committee of ladies, and submit the question to them; we would settle it in half an hour. Meanwhile, papa, go you and smoke your afternoon cigar, which I know you have been longing to do for the last ten minutes. Mr. Norton and I are off for a walk before the sunshine is all gone; I have a host of questions to ask him about Danbury and Plymridge, which he is, I see, longing to tell, and you shall see us again in good time before dinner."

To this the general, only too glad to find his daughter once more in such good spirits, made no demur, only bargaining that Norton would not leave Saltram without seeing him, and then went off to his cigar.

As for Norton, he would on the whole have gladly avoided the intended catechising, but in common politeness thought that he could scarcely decline it. He had come to Saltram to ask a favour, which was

readily granted, and it would be more than ungracious if he now suddenly took his leave the very moment he had obtained his request.

In a few minutes, therefore, he and his fair questioner were strolling across the park, as they had often done in former days; but the old easy familiarity of those days seemed all at once to have vanished, and the conversation soon flagged, and at last fairly died out.

But Edith Jervis was not to be foiled so easily.

“ You are determined, Mr. Norton,” she said gaily, “ not to begin, so I must.”

“ It is not easy,” he answered, “ to answer questions that are not yet propounded. What can I say, but that I am ready to be catechised ? ”

“ Nothing can be better than such a spirit. To begin then, is she pretty ? ”

“ Pretty is not the word,” says Amator ;

“she is something more and better than that, not at all a pink and white beauty, if you mean *that* by pretty, but brown and sunshiny, with brown hair and hazel eyes, and a smile that wins the hearts of little children, and—and—”

“Has won somebody else’s? A very charming, dainty description; quite a little rosebud of a maiden.”

“Not so *very* little,” replied Norton, “though not a dragon. Small and *piquante*, and in matters of dress, fond of greys, and white, and silver; and her voice, soft and musical; forgive me, Mrs. Jervis, if I say I know of but one voice like it, and that is to be heard at Saltram.”

A faint glow of colour and delight came into that lady’s face as she answered,

“Mrs. Jervis is only too happy to remind you of so charming a person; and of all names, you have chosen my special favourite —‘Mary,’ the simplest, purest, and most

lovable. ‘Edith’ always seems like cardboard to me ; there is an element of stiffness about it,—just a grain or two of terrible self-will ; don’t you think so ? ”

“ But a grain or two of self-will,” said Norton, “ is all for good ; nothing is so offensive to me as a weak milk-and-watery pliancy, that seems always yielding, and yet never yields. Self-will, rightly guided, is an element of strength ; it means keeping one’s own ground, and maintaining one’s own opinion.”

“ Whether right or wrong ? ” interrupts his companion.

“ No, no, Mrs. Jervis ; if wrong, of course it cannot be for good ; I am only supposing the case of holding to an opinion that is right, and dropping it when proved to be unsound.”

“ Ah ! ” she replied, “ there lies the rub. Who is to prove one’s favourite opinions to be unsound ? Where are we to look for a

guide that can be trusted to say when they must be dropped?"

"Such guides are scarce enough," he answered; "but still one has reason, and conscience, and moral sense, of one's own."

"And instinct, Mr. Norton. We poor women must not be deprived of that power, or we should never come to any decision at all when the time arrives for swift words and swift action. Again and again I have had to act suddenly, at some crisis or other, on the spur of the moment, and afterwards found that the course taken was actually the best, or the only safe one, though I can call my guide by no other name than instinct. As to any 'reason' for what I did or said, I should have been utterly puzzled to give one."

"Such occasions, no doubt, do happen," said Norton, "when one is driven to act at a moment's notice, with scarcely time to think, much less to carry out a chain of

logic ; and then the quick wit of a woman is often worth the slower wisdom of a hundred men. The woman often has the swifter, clearer, understanding. She waits *perhaps* for Understanding to say, This *is*, or *ought* to be so, though she won't wait for Reason to say, It *must* be so.”*

“They will not *wait*,” replied his companion, “but they jump to the conclusion by a sort of lucky intuition.”

“You have hit upon the very phrase I wanted,” replied Norton, “if from ‘lucky’ you shut out the element of chance. It is lucky only so far as concerns the patient who, but for her happy guess, might bleed to death while the wise men are arguing out the reasons why he ought to live.”

“Then you do not agree with Pope’s savage judgment on the fair sex ?”

“I do not remember it at the moment, but I know that he was as spiteful a critic as he was keen. What does he say ?”

* Coleridge.

“He says *they have no character at all*, in one of his neat, sparkling couplets,—

‘Nothing so true as what you once let fall,—
Most women have no character at all;
Matter too soft a lasting mark to bear,
And best distinguished by black, brown, and fair.’

And this, too, in an epistle to a lady!”

“Clever enough as an epigram,” said Norton, “but hardly true of the women even of Pope’s day, whatever it may be of our own time. And Pope himself must have known better if he had but one such friend as Mary Wortley Montague—a woman of marked passions, powers, tastes, and talents. But he quarrelled with her, as he did with most of his female friends, and when once angry his pen was utterly unscrupulous.”

“And yet you think, Mr. Norton, that what was hard upon a Montague may be fair enough for the women of our day. Are we, then, so much degenerated since the days of powder, and patches, and—”

“ Port wine ? ” suggested Norton, “ if you are in search of another P to make up your trio. No, certainly not. But, taken as a whole, our women are more artificial,—so it seems to me ; more tied up by the laws of etiquette, of social custom, and of fashion. One young lady dresses, speaks, acts, walks, and carries herself, precisely and exactly like all other young ladies. This is a kind of bondage ; and they who tamely submit to it, must more or less lose their individuality. Loss of will, and of free choice, is loss of strength and of character. The accomplished and beautiful Miss Jones is the very counterpart of the accomplished and beautiful Miss Smith.”

“ And do all your acquaintances fall under the lineage of one or other of these illustrious families—Smith and Jones ? ”

“ No, no,” replied Norton. “ Life would be hardly tolerable if society had lost its savour to such a horrible degree. Even in my

small circle, there are hosts of exceptions to the tyranny of fashion. I have only to look at ‘The Court,’ and Saltram,—and Plymridge,” he slowly added, “and I find women what they should be;—widely different, and yet all ladies; free, and yet feminine; artful, and yet artless; womanly, and yet not mawkish; frank, gracious; our willing slaves, and even more willing masters!”

“Ah! now, Mr. Norton,” she said, “you have completely silenced me with such a shower of compliments. I have not a word more to say, even if I could talk epigrams in your clever fashion,—certainly not a word in defence of your stereotyped young lady, who, from her chignon down to her high-heeled boots, is ready to obey any fashion, however ugly or however preposterous. I had no notion that the library at Danbury was so full of pictures of womanly perfection. You must have studied

hard to have got up your subject so thoroughly."

"I have been studying but one book," he answered, in a cheery voice; "a kindly, loving, true woman's heart, and there I found all my perfection. It came like light to me, after the dark days; and as I look out into the future, life seems all golden with promise."

"So I, too, looked once," she replied; "so I looked, and hoped, and believed. I was never weary of dreaming golden dreams; no shadows, I thought, could ever touch their happy brightness. May yours be truer dreams, Mr. Norton, and your day grow brighter and brighter to the very end. The same hand that sends me shattered hopes, a weary past, and a sunless future, may perhaps make your path all sunshine and peace, whatever our deserts may be."

"You are taking me back," said Norton, "to the ground of an old battle-field over

which we once fought, but it seems hardly worth while to fight now again. But surely, Edith Jervis—if I may once more so call call you—when you talk of a *sunless* future, it is a future that lies pretty much in your own making. Many hopes have been shattered, but not all. You have a father to live for; a home to brighten and make happy; and yourself to live for. Surely your work in life is not yet all done; a woman in the prime of all her powers, and those powers neither few nor small. Such gifts ought not to run to seed in mere idle waste.”

“Perhaps not,” said she wearily; “but why was I made to love a scoundrel, and why was my boy taken from me? Why should my heart’s love be thus scorned and blighted? What have I done to deserve so hopeless a fate?”

“I can give you no answers,” replied Norton, “to such queries as these; nor if I

could would they satisfy you. But you have grouped together things that are distinct and wide apart,—unlike in nature and to be looked at from different points. Shall I say what few words I have to say about them, plainly, as a friend would ?”

“ Quite plainly,” she answered, “ and as a friend ; the sharpest thrusts I ever yet had, have come from friends, and I dare say I deserved them all. And according to your creed, every stab was for my good. Speak out by all means, I entreat you, as a friend.”

“ In the first place, then,” said Norton, disregarding the sarcasm of the last few words, “ no one *made* you love the scoundrel you speak of; it was the act of your own free-will, urged on, led, guided by circumstances perhaps ; but still your own will acting only under your own dominion. I cannot tell you what sad cause took your baby from you ; whether one of the fatal mischances that beset infant life, a touch of

some evil disease from without or born in him, though, in any case, only such a cause as may befall any child of any sorrowing, loving mother on earth. But when you ask me to say why you have been so smitten, or what you have done to deserve it, I can give you no answer at all. The question is altogether in other hands. *His* to whom it is all known, without a shadow of doubt or confusion. You must go to Him to solve the enigma. He can do this, and if you believe in Him, He will."

"And meanwhile?" she answered.

"Meanwhile," he answered, "set to work hopefully, earnestly, as one that means to be healed and to live, and to be yet the joy and comfort of your father's house. Assert that element of self-will of which you spoke; depend upon it as something stronger, better, than cardboard. The harder and sooner you set to work, all the

sooner will the harvest be reaped. There are scores of ragged, ignorant, children in the hamlet close by Saltram gates, in the Saltram workhouse, and on sick beds, can nothing be done to help them in body, mind or heart? In helping to heal their sorrows, you may at least forget your own."

"But at times," she said, "I am utterly unable, unfit, to work."

"All the more need," replied Norton gaily, "to fight the battle right out. It seems cowardly to give way when one has such a store of forces as yours in reserve; strength, good-will, pluck, and good sense. Call out the reserve, and in a single struggle the victory will be won. There lies the work, ready for you, crying out to be done. Who can do it better than Edith Jervis, if she but once resolve it shall be done?"

For a moment she made no answer; but words came at length, and came from the heart of the speaker.

"Spoken," she said, "like a brave and true friend ; sharp words it may be, but such as I will not, cannot, forget. Thanks for them all, and now let us talk of other things. You have had more than enough of my troubles for to-day, and it is time for us to be turning back."

They reached the house in good spirits, and in good time for Norton to see the General before dinner.

He was delighted and as grateful as ever at the change in his daughter's manner, and could not conceal either feeling from him when she had left them as the first bell rang.

"Norton," he said very gravely, "you are a magician I believe. Edith is not the same woman she was four hours ago. What is the spell by which you contrive to rule her wayward will, and force her to shake off the cloud that seems to overhang her ? "

"The best of all spells, my dear General ;

I have made her take an interest in herself, shown her that work is waiting to be done, and that she is the only person to do it. It was hard work, but I think that I have conquered at last, and that the harvest will be worth waiting for. And now (he added), "I must say good-bye, for I must be back at Parbury to-night."

"To-night if you like, but not till after dinner, even if all the post captains on midshipmen are waiting for you. I have told Butlers to get up a bottle of twenty port, and if you won't let me to drink it I will never serve you. An hour for dinner and a hour for digestion, and then the best wine house in Saltram station shall carry the bottle as readily as you like. And by the way give the second bottle, and here comes Mr. Saling Smith. I give you the thanks. Do know your name?"

The evening was as pleasant as one as Roger had spent there, and his remem-

bered it with true pleasure for many a long day.

It was late at night when he reached his own quarters, tired out with a good day's work, and happy with the thought that at the coming meeting of the trustees even Searl himself might be checkmated.

He felt glad, too, that he had not only made his peace at Saltram, but gained in the old General a firmer ally and friend than ever. And of this he would have been even more firmly convinced had he heard the words of the old man and his daughter as they parted for the night.

“Edith, my child,” said he, as he kissed her, “young Norton is a worthy, good fellow, and deserves all his good fortune, even this last of a good wife. I once thought and hoped, my darling, that he was looking elsewhere to give his heart. There is no man in England I would have welcomed more heartily as a son-in-law.

Did the thought ever occur to Edith Jervis?"

"More than that, papa. It occurred to him. But I told him it was impossible ; and impossible it was, though I cannot tell you why. But God bless him for asking me, and for coming here to-day. Good night, good night."

Then with eyes full of happy tears she kissed him and was gone.

This puzzled the General more than ever ; but the reason why Edith Jervis refused the Curate of Danbury's offer he, happily, never knew. He was a wise man, now and then content to be ignorant. He smoked many a cigar over the knotty question ; but he never asked why it was impossible !

END OF VOL. II.





